University of Alberta

A Study of the Reading Experiences of "At Risk" Grade 10 Students

by

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Abstract

This qualitative case study sought to develop insight into the reading experiences of a group of at-risk Grade 10 students enrolled in an alternate learning environment. Chapter One gives some background information on the researcher, the setting, the program and the participants. Chapter Two reviews literature that discusses adolescents, reading and some pedagogical perspectives. Chapter Three outlines the research design, in which data were collected through a written inventory, taped interviews, conversations with the teachers and observations in the classroom over a one semester time period. Chapter Four introduces the participants and highlights their thoughts on early and later reading, coping strategies, personal likes and dislikes as well a short discussion on computer usage. Chapter Five continues developing the profiles of the participants and also introduces the classroom teacher. The topics of acceptance and encouragement, flexibility, choice, and routines are also discussed in this chapter. The final chapter outlines the limitations and delimitations and offers some implications for teachers. A short critique of the program is also included in this final chapter. The findings from this research would be of value to classroom teachers who work with all students, not just those at risk.

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This academic journey would not have been possible without the constant support and encouragement of so many individuals.

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This study would not have taken place if I had not had the tremendous cooperation of the wonderful Plus students at Mountainview High School. They made gathering data a pleasure. As I always say, working with adolescents is like riding a roller coaster, and this group was no exception. I thank them for trusting me enough to share their stories. It was a fun ride!

Mr. T. and Madame M. reaffirmed that good teachers are tremendously valuable, and I can't adequately express my gratitude for welcoming me into their classrooms and sharing their gifts with me. Their students are fortunate to have them!

A sabbatical year granted by Calgary Catholic School District provided me with time to read, gather data, and reflect. The year was a gift, and I am deeply appreciative of all of the support from the district. Superintendents Patricia Dorney and Dr. Andra McGinn were always in the background offering support, and I thank them as well.

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Glossary

AP: The Advanced Placement Program is a co-operative educational endeavor between secondary schools, colleges, and universities. It allows high school students to undertake college-level academic learning in AP courses and gives them the opportunity to show that they have mastered the advanced material by taking the AP exams. Students can receive credit, advanced placement, or both from thousands of colleges and universities that participate in the Advanced Placement Program.

IOP: The Integrated Occupational Program is designed for students whose learning styles, abilities, and needs are best met through an integrated, real-life approach to teaching and learning. IOP generally runs from Grade 8 to Grade 12; however, a student may enter or leave the program at whatever point is best for him or her. After receiving 80 credits, students earn a Certificate of Achievement. The program offers courses designed to improve students' basic skills in mathematics, language arts, science and social studies and to prepare them for a variety of entry-level jobs. Candidates are identified following consultation with teachers, guidance counselors, and parents.

MAX: The Maximum Potential class is designed for students with a learning disability and a history of academic difficulty. The emphasis in the MAX class is to assist students in developing specific attendance, organizational, work, and time management skills to enable them to cope with the learning demands of the high school curriculum.

REACH: Remedial Education and Assistance for Change is a program designed to help students who are at risk of dropping out of school. Students in this program receive remedial assistance in language arts and/or mathematics. Candidates are identified following consultation with staff, guidance counselors, social workers, and parents. All students enter the program on a one-month trial basis.

CHAPTER 1:

INTRODUCTION: THE START OF THE TAPESTRY

As I began this journey, the image of the creation of a tapestry came to mind. Rich and vibrant colors blended with different textures and patterns, and all combined to create something new, something unexpected. This process, this act of creation, takes into account the varied experiences that I acquired while working with students in a number of roles. My professional reading adds to the tapestry, and the teacher and the students in my study are the main threads—colorful, quirky, unique. The final product, the summary, is a composite of all the pieces, complex, yet simple; well worth, I believe, sharing. As with many creations, the final product is often not what one expected.

Background: The Researcher

I have been a teacher of reading for over 23 years. During that time I have worked with kindergarten through Grade 9 students, in a variety of school settings. Many of those days were filled extracting treasures from a seemingly bottomless trunk full of strategies and "hooks" that would capture my students in what I consider the wonderful world of reading. I scoured bookstores, faithfully attended inservices, and devoutly read *The Horn Book* and the *Reading Teacher* in search of appropriate and what I hoped would be "engaging" titles for my students that would encourage them to join Frank Smith's (1987) "Literacy Club."

I began my teaching career interacting with young readers, and I can honestly say that during those years I never came across a child who entered my classroom stating, "I don't want to learn to read." These five- and six-year-olds with whom I shared my days were anxious to conquer the reading puzzle and had a desire to develop their reading abilities. They may not all have met with equal success, and many did indeed struggle, but these early readers still had the will, the enthusiasm to learn.

I always assumed that this was the norm until I began working with older students who avoided reading and considered reading boring and a chore. Many of these students became resistant and reluctant readers. It is because I witnessed this changed attitude, this apparent disenchantment with the act of reading, that I decided to search for clarification and clues to why students' attitudes towards reading changed as they moved from elementary grades to senior high.

When I embarked on this research journey, I expected to gain some insight into the adolescent reader and perhaps find some reflections or revelations of watershed moments when students began to lose enthusiasm when they were given reading opportunities. I hoped the findings would be of interest to other researchers and teachers of adolescents. Some profound statements on early experiences could perhaps motivate some alternate instructional procedures and thus prevent possible future difficulties for upcoming students. Granted, they were naïve beliefs, but nevertheless authentic thoughts, that I had prior to the actual research.

I felt it essential to lay a foundation before I started the research, so I read extensively in the field of reading, and particularly adolescent reading, and I reference the sources liberally throughout this discussion. The readings have expanded my knowledge of the reading process and have been extremely valuable, not just in this research, but also in my current role as the principal of a junior high school. There is a wealth of professional writing, especially with regard to multiliteracies, and the implications for teachers are tremendous.

Much to my surprise, the data that I subsequently collected and examined opened up the realm of teaching practices, especially good teaching practices that teachers use to encourage and facilitate learning, not simply reading. I had not anticipated this but felt that these new observations required embarking on a literature review on the topic of teacher-student relationships and the characteristics of relationship-based classroom environments. This review occurred after I completed the interviews and observations, and it has, I hope, added to the richness of the research.

Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this research was to explore the reading experiences of students enrolled in the English 10-2 Plus program at a large urban high school. This program is intended to assist students who have not experienced academic success in earlier English/language arts classes. Through conversation and collaborative interpretation with classroom teachers and students in this program, I sought a heightened awareness and a deepened understanding of student engagement and participation in reading activities in one English classroom.

Research Question

The main question that drove this research was, What are students' reading experiences while enrolled in the English Language Arts (or ELA} 10-2 Plus program? The research was guided by the following questions:

1. In what ways might an exploration and observation of students' reading experiences in an ELA 10-2 Plus program offer new insights into adolescent reading patterns and interactions with text?

2. How might such a study help teachers and teacher educators gain insight into productive pedagogical strategies and approaches for students who appear disenchanted with in-school reading?

The experiences that I gathered while teaching Grade 9 language arts for four years gave me firsthand experience with students who fail English courses. There is a plethora of reasons that students fail, and failure has been researched extensively, but I am more concerned with hearing the voice of the disengaged learner, the young adult who often views English classes with disdain, the young adult who flips through a novel and has difficulty becoming engaged with the literary text. These students have a great deal to say to teachers and to each other about reading, and I hope that in giving them a platform, I will help students of the future to benefit.

I decided to use a case study involving six students as the basis for my research. I began with a written inventory followed by several one on one taped interviews with the students. I also interviewed the classroom teacher and another teacher involved in the project. These interviews combined with a number of observations and discussions garnered, what I felt was enough data for a good exploration of the dynamics within this alternate program.

Discussion of Terms

In this research I use the term **"at risk"** to refer to this group of Grade 10 students who were involved in the case study. By "at risk" I mean students who are likely to drop out of school, become disengaged, and may not succeed in achieving their academic potential.

Reading, as used in the context of this study, refers to the making of meaning, primarily from text. In this particular class setting, the majority of reading experiences involved print text. Students used anthologies, teacher-produced handouts, or both fiction and nonfiction text when reading. A unit on film study enabled the students to view text differently. There was one computer in the room, but it was not connected to the Internet, and I observed it being used only for word processing.

Because this is a very large and relatively modern high school, there certainly would have been opportunities for students to access banks of computers, but I did not observe any interactions other than those in the classroom. These students were permitted to use electronic gadgets when working; however, I did not examine what they were listening to.

Literacy encompasses far more than the above-mentioned view of reading. Literacy involves making meaning through a variety of ways, and I believe that these students were very adept at gathering information from alternate forms of communication. They had access to home computers and were comfortable using the Internet, and their at-home reading involved a considerable amount of reading of the computer screen as well as other electronic media. I have used the term *literacy* throughout my writing, but the major focus has been the examination of the reading patterns of this group of students in this particular classroom.

Writing, although part of every balanced English program, was not a focus of this research. I limited my data collection to reading because I felt that an examination of the writing of these students would have made the research overwhelming.

Background: Current Reality

Until Grade 10, students in Alberta schools are primarily kept in heterogeneous groupings for language arts instruction. Some differentiation may occur, but the language arts outcomes are prescribed, and it is an expectation that, for the most part, all students will strive to meet those outcomes. Once they reach Grade 10, students are streamed into several programs, either ELA 10-1, with the goal of challenging the ELA 30-1 diploma exam, or ELA 10-2, formerly known as English 13, with the goal of challenging the ELA 30-2 diploma exam.

In its Program of Studies, Alberta Learning (2000) has designed the two programs so that they are differentiated by standards. ELA 10-1, 20-1, and 30-1 are "intended for students who have demonstrated strengths in their use of language and their understanding of print and non print texts" (p. 8); and ELA 10-2, 20-2, and 30-2 are "intended for students who have demonstrated lower achievement in junior high school" (p. 8). Students in both programs must "satisfy certain minimum requirements in their study of works of literature and other texts in oral, print, visual and multimedia forms" (p. 8).

Many of the English programs that are offered at the high school level follow traditional instructional methods. A Program of Studies (Alberta Learning, 2000) is in place, in which many of the older instructional strategies and methods of evaluation are present . Evaluation has not significantly changed in Alberta in the last 20 years, however, some schools have reevaluated existing programs and have initiated some different ways of meeting the outcomes. One such "project" is currently being offered at a local high school, the ELA 10-2 Plus Program, and this school served as the location for my study. By closely examining a number of students who are enrolled in this program, I hoped to gain an understanding of their reading patterns and interests.

Background: The Setting

I have identified the school in which I conducted this research with the pseudonym *Mountainview High School*. This school is situated in a major city in Alberta and had a student population of 2,300 at the commencement of the 2003/2004 school year. Students who attend this high school come from diverse backgrounds and socioeconomic groups. As with any large population, home settings vary: A number of the students come from homes with two parents, and a number live in single-parent or blended-family situations. Of the six students whom I interviewed, three came from "traditional" homes with both natural parents, and the other three had lived in a variety of family settings, including with stepparents and stepsiblings. One of the students lived with a single mother and an older brother.

As would be expected in such a large learning community, a menu of "special" programs run under a variety of acronyms such as MAX, REACH, IOP, ESL, AP (see the List of Acronyms in Glossary). All of the programs are aimed at providing instructional support at the appropriate level so that students meet with success. Initially, it was not the primary goal of the Plus program to provide support for students enrolled in these special programs; yet over the years some of the students who have enrolled in this program have been members of some of these classes.

This is a large high school with over 150 teaching staff and 100 support staff, and nearly 900 students were enrolled in Grade 10 at the commencement of the 2002/2003 school year. This school also has a stable graduation rate of 72%. Students who graduate go on to a variety of secondary programs, and it is of interest that there is a core of teachers at the school who also graduated from the school, so there is considerable pride and tradition in this institution.

ELA 10-2 Plus Program

History. This ELA 10-2 Plus Program began in the fall of 2000 as a district approved/sponsored Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) project. AISI is described on the Alberta Government (2007) website as

> a collaborative partnership of the education community [initiated] in 1999 and first implemented in all Alberta school authorities in 2000. The goal of this program is to improve student learning and performance by fostering initiatives that reflect the unique needs and circumstances of each school authority.
>
> To accomplish the goal of AISI, the Government of Alberta invested $204 million ($68 million for each year of operation) to implement the first cycle of AISI (2000 to 2003). (¶ 1-2)

The English department head and several teachers who were concerned about the failure rates in the English 13 courses spearheaded the AISI-sponsored project. Sections from the original application (Appendix A) follow and offer a concise summary of the process:

> The idea for this project began in the fall of 1999 when three English 13 teachers met and discovered that in each of their classes over half of the students had failed either Grade 9 Language Arts or English 13 in the previous year. The students shared a number of characteristics which contributed to negative behaviours in the classroom: the students were often discipline problems, they did not purchase the necessary textbooks, they had irregular attendance patterns and some also had attention deficit disorder and did not work well in large group situation. In all cases, these factors contributed to negative attitudes about the classroom in particular and school in general. Many had been passed from year to year, despite failing grades and they had never developed successful work habits. The pattern of failure and poor behavior seemed bound to be repeated. (p. 1)

The goal that Madame M., an original member of the planning committee, reported was to "increase academic success by offering more individualized, one-on-one instruction to students who have not demonstrated success in the past."

Funding was provided, and members of this English department were given professional development opportunities in which they reviewed current literature and had the opportunity to collaborate and modify existing curriculum outcomes. They also used the release time, which was one of the foundations of the project, to develop individualized learning packages that included differentiated methods of assessment.

Madame M. explained:

> We got together, and we planned our units, we planned our evaluations, we planned where we worked on the CUM [Cumulative School Record] files of the kids that were coming. We put an awful lot of work into the beginning of it.

The classroom teacher, Mr. T., was also involved from the beginning of the project:

> One of the chief aims was that we would spark an interest in English that had been quashed out of these kids for the last three or four or six years. Get them reading and writing again and believing that they actually could do it. And then finally just to get the number up of the kids that we had graduating at Mountainview High School.

Before the Plus program was implemented, Mr. T. noted that "the regular classroom just did not work for them [the students in the Plus program], and the graduation rates for them as we tracked them through three years of school were just brutal." Madame M. agreed:

> The aims of this program are students—obviously, the success. First of all, attendance was a big issue and the aim—there are so many. But the main one was that students would actually have some success and be able to take the 30-2 [English course] because we only have this at the Grade 10 level and at the Grade 11 level. Students we have there are students that we thought would not make it in a regular class of thirty-five.

The project began with one class of students under the direction of Mr. T., and a second class of students ran in the second semester under the direction of Madame M. Originally, the committee hoped that an ELA 20-2 Plus section would run simultaneously; however, scheduling did not allow for the two classes, so the first ELA 20-2 Plus class ran the following year.

Placement. Students are screened prior to placement in the course, and recommendations from junior high teachers are respected. Madame M. reported:

> We look at the CUM files coming from Grade 9, and that's the main one. It's attendance issues, the overall traditional, quotation marks, failure. . . . We pick the students, and there is no stigma attached to being in the classroom. In that classroom it's not considered to—you often hear children in high school say "We're the dummies," and when they—first of all, the actual name of the Program is *Plus*. And . . . even the connotation of that word— . . . And also, at the beginning of the year when students ask, "Well, why am I in this class? . . . Is it because I'm a dummy?" And we tell them that we have actually done the research and that their learning styles indicate that they would work better with [this] teacher. We sort of say "It's the teacher who is giving the class" rather than "It's the student who needs the class" and that we have earmarked them as students who will experience success in the setting that we're creating.

School officials have compiled records (including the number of students who pass, overall comparisons of attendance rates, student satisfaction surveys, etc.) and submitted their findings to the district and, subsequently, provincial authorities. A summary of the report submitted for the 2001/2002 school year is in Appendix B.

The dynamics of the AISI program changed in 2002, and the English 10-2 Plus program no longer receives extra support from the district; however, the program has been deemed valuable and continues to be supported at the school level. Recordkeeping methods have also altered, and because AISI's requisite accountability system is no longer required, the extensive data that were previously part of the program are no longer gathered. A variety of factors have caused the recordkeeping to be somewhat looser, including the standard excuse of increasing class numbers and fewer hours of preparation time. Nevertheless, the teachers involved still voice their enthusiasm for the program. In fact, Madame M. reported, "We still track the kids. You have to because the teachers who are involved in the Plus program are very, very anxious that it continue." The pass/fail record of this group of students will be further discussed in the final chapter.

Profile of Class Members

When I made my first visitation to the class, 16 students were in attendance, 8 boys and 8 girls; 2 students were reported absent. All of the students had failed a previous English course in high school or Grade 9, or the Grade 9 teacher had deemed them "at risk" of failing. Mr. T. reported:

> [The students enrolled] had a negative experience in the last year or two in their language arts classrooms—usually a history of failure. Difficulty with reading in many cases, and I'd say maybe a quarter to a third of the kids have all the skills necessary to be in a regular classroom; it's just that their work habits are so poor.

The students were Caucasian, with the exception of two students. One female student was of a mixed Jamaican-Spanish heritage, and the other female student was of Asian heritage. The students ranged in age from 15 to nearly 17 years, with an average age of students who enter Grade 10 of 15 years. Madame M. described the students:

> These are kids who march to their own drummer. If we were really to have the resources and we really knew these kids really well, we would find that they are just not all mathematically logical learners. They're visual learners. They're kinetic learners. They're the kids who learn from so many different stimuli. After our mini lesson or after our sort of get-together at the beginning of the lesson, they're welcome to play music. No swear words. It's for the whole room—or that my nerves can stand. Or if they have their CDs—most of the kids will have their CDs; you know, one CD between two kids, one ear here and one ear there.

Classroom Organization

The students had organized themselves into groups and, as I later found out, were allowed to select the seating pattern; thus, it is not surprising that all of the back seats in the classroom were occupied. The desks were arranged in traditional rows facing the front, with the exception of a chair that was in the far left corner of the room. It had a free-standing table in front of it. There was also an independent working carrel at the far left side of the room that the students used occasionally. The teacher's desk was cordoned off from the students' desks by a bookcase on the right side of the room. This allowed some privacy for both the teacher and students who might require assistance. A computer was available at the side of the room, and a cart full of dictionaries, thesauri, anthologies, and novels was at the right front of the room. Examples of student work from a number of Mr. T.'s classes covered the bulletin boards and side boards, and several student-created mobiles hung from the ceiling.

Observations

It was apparent when I first entered this classroom that the classroom context was slightly different from that of other classes I had observed. The students came into the classroom, often laughing and chatting, and Mr. T. met them at the door. Music played softly in the background, and he greeted each student warmly. He asked different students personal questions such as "Did you win the hockey game?" or "How was work?" All of this seemingly casual conversation helped to set the tone of acceptance and a feeling that he was interested in them. On several occasions the conversations between the teacher and the students continued until all were somewhat settled. Often other students not enrolled in the class used the class change to drop in, ask a question, or drop off an assignment. Mr. T. handled their questions easily and moved into the class with apparent ease.

Once the preliminary settling was over and Mr. T. had called for the students to focus on their work, he reviewed the last lesson and then gave a 10-minute "mini lesson" on a skill or strategy that would assist them in their individual projects. The skill lessons had a number of focuses, including inference building ("Why do you think he did that?") or a discussion of a newspaper article on teenagers, a show on television, and so on. There was always discussion, and the students gave answers, took guesses, and made statements.

On one occasion Mr. T. referred to the previous evening's CBC news report on the noticeable difference in achievement levels between genders. The report had stated that female students were now achieving higher results in all subjects, with the exception of computer-related courses. However, on closer examination, the report was not very accurate, and the survey had included only one group of students; nevertheless, it certainly sparked a very heated discussion that continued into the halls at the end of the school day. Mr. T.'s words of caution that one should not believe everything that is in print was lost in the mêlée.

When I questioned Mr. T. about the differences between the Plus program and other classes, he responded:

> Where I position myself bodywise is completely different. I don't make them sit in the same sort of spots daily. I let them pretty much sit wherever they're comfortable. That's where it's okay with me that they're there. Definitely, though, where I am bodywise is important because I very, very rarely stand at the front of them.

When I asked why he situates himself in such a manner, he stated, "I think that they have had so often a negative experience with a teacher standing at the front, howling away at them, that it's the absolute last thing that they need, is someone again standing at the front yelling." I found his revelations to be interesting, and they affirmed my belief that he exhibited what van Manen (1991) referred to as *pedagogical tact*: "To exercise tact means to see a situation calling for sensitivity, to understand the meaning of what is seen, to sense the significance of this situation, to know how and what to do, and to actually do something right" (p. 146).

Mr. T. knows that these students have had numerous negative experiences with sometimes impatient, unthinking teachers, and he makes a conscious effort to avoid any negative behaviors they may have exhibited in the past. Thus, he presents the students with learning situations in which they feel that they can succeed. He also prefers to sit or crouch beside students when he assists them rather than tower over them. I also noted that when students go to him for support, rather than sit across from the student while he is ensconced at his teacher's desk, Mr. T. moves to the adjacent table.

One of the most obvious differences in the Plus program is its individualization. Losing assignments or handouts is common with these types of learners, so student work is monitored carefully and is kept in the classroom. It is reviewed on a nightly basis, and feedback is given privately during the next class. Madame M. affirmed:

> The whole methodology in that room is different. Because the numbers are small, we can actually do things. Everything remains in the room, the books, the binders, the work. And I have something every single night to mark because we're all going through a different phase.

It was common to hear Mr. T. ask a student what he or she had done the day before, and in some cases he checked on their progress prior to dismissal. Students may have attempted to avoid the work, but the teacher, in a reasonable, discreet manner, reminded them of their responsibilities. This check-and-balance system often spread into other subject areas, and the teacher would ask, "How did the religion exam go?" or "How are things going in science?"

Completion of assignments is desired but often is not a reality; therefore students are assigned marks for any portion of the assigned task. There is also tremendous flexibility in due dates, with a number of projects reaching completion weeks after the unit is wrapped up. The original proposal (Appendix A) stated:

> To address the problem created by irregular attendance, we agreed that no student would receive failing or 'zero' grades for assignments. If a student missed any classes, he or she could begin at the point the student had left off, rather than receive a grade of zero, for example—experience has showed us that few students made up missed assignments. Files would be maintained for each student to keep a careful record of all assignments completed. An assignment that was deemed less than 50% would be returned to the student for more work and/or revision. (p. 1)

Mr. T. supports and encourages students to make choices: in reading material, seating arrangement, or assessment method. A number of students expressed concern about reading aloud in class, and he always requested volunteers; thus no one was forced into a compromising situation.

I sensed that a real community was being built over the five-month semester. Class rules were established that valued everyone, and the teacher did not tolerate putdowns. Mr. T. revealed that several of the students were having difficulty in other classes, and a number had been, using his words, "kicked out" for a variety of reasons, mostly defiance. However, I did not see any such behavior in the time that I spent in the classroom. Perhaps the students and Mr. T. were conscious of my presence in the classroom, but in my roles of administrator and former central office consultant, I have had the experience of visiting and observing a great number of classroom settings, and I sensed that this was a safe, risk-free environment in which the teacher valued the students and treated them as individuals who were important.

What I did have difficulty with, however, was remaining conscious of my role of researcher. Often during my observations I became caught up in the lesson or thinking about a possible teaching implication and would fail to record comments or discussions. I also had difficulty simply sitting or not guiding or coaching when students obviously needed assistance. I walked around the classroom and stopped to chat, assist, or clarify if requested, and I think that this informal, almost casual contact provided me with opportunities to get to know the students prior to interviewing them and thus facilitated the interview process.

CHAPTER 2:

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE: ASSEMBLING THE THREADS

This research has three major themes that helped to build the foundation for my study. The first topic is a survey of the literature on the adolescent because this group is the focus of the research. A second area investigates the practices that occur during literacy acquisition because literacy is the focus of the research question. The third area is an examination of the complex dynamics that exist in classroom settings. The exploration of this third topic was not an initial part of the research proposal but arose when students discussed the relationship in the classroom. I felt that it was important to review this field because it is so apparently important to student learning and success.

Conceptual Framework 1: The Adolescent

The adolescent who sits in the back row of many of our middle school and high school classes is vastly different from, yet in some ways remarkably very similar to, the adolescent of 20 years ago. The hairstyles and hemlines may vary, yet there is a commonality between the different generations. Lewis and Finders (2002) explained:

> Biological changes often characterize entry into adolescence and these changes have come to signify so much that we tend to describe adolescents in ways that reference their biological changes. We refer to 'surging, quivering, quaking, raging hormones' as if to personify these famous biological changes and create a category we can all recognize. (p. 103)

Lewis and Finders also reminded us that the concept of *adolescent* did not exist "before the last two decades of the 19th century" (p. 103), and we must also remember that the behavior and characteristics of the adolescent are based on cultural influences. Therefore, the adolescent who is being discussed in the context of this research is the North

American stereotypical teenager. Such young adults are wooed by big business, are targets of countless jokes, and are often the bane of parents' and teachers' existence, yet they are delightful and full of promise to those who see through the fog.

Current brain research under the direction of Sousa (2005), Wolfe (2001), and Feinstein (2004) has provided some helpful information in regard to the complex cognitive state in which adolescents exist. The tempestuous label that has been assigned to teenagers was, until recently, blamed on hormone shifts; however, the emerging dialogue on the brain indicates that, in reality, the teenage brain is, according to Feinstein, "under construction" (p. 1): "Teen brains resemble blueprints more than skyscrapers. Instead of thinking about a teenage mind as an empty house that needs furnishing, understand it as the framing of a house that still needs walls, wiring and a roof" (p. 175).

The "wiring" that is in place focuses, not on logic, but rather on emotions. Cause-and-effect balances are not yet established; thus risky, impulsive behavior often occurs. Feinstein (2004) confirmed this: "Teenager's emotions are regulated by the highly excitable and passionate amygdala" (p. 86), "an organ that controls our often tumultuous array of emotions. Pleasure, anger and fear all spring from this small but mighty structure located a few inches from the ears in the lower center of the brain" (p. 13). She clarified this: "Adolescents change emotions by the nanosecond, regularly blow situations out of proportion and find something to be self-conscious about at every turn" (p. 86).

Inlay (2005) discussed adolescence in terms of a roller coaster ride: "Changes taking place in adolescents' brains, even more than the obvious physical changes, are the catalyst for such dramatic ups and downs" (p. 41). She highlighted several "needs" that must be addressed before students can learn: The "need to experiment" (p. 41), combined with the "need for autonomy" (p. 42), the "need to belong—yet be yourself" (p. 42), and the "need for personal meaning" (p. 43) are essential and must be recognized and acknowledged. If these needs are not met, then students will not make the progress that we wish them to make. Inlay summed up her beliefs:

> When middle schoolers relate with adults and peers in mutually respectful ways, when they are not afraid to take intellectual risks, and when they are presented with a challenging and personally meaningful curriculum, they thrive academically and become engaged with their school community, laying the foundation for engagement in the larger community. (p. 43)

Reflecting on the setting for this research, I can attest that the "passionate" traits to which Feinstein (2004, p. 86) referred were apparent in the classroom. Students were terrifically vocal and emotional about television shows (*Survivor*), football statistics, and friendships. They were also very taken up with the latest "gossip" (who had been suspended, who had been kicked out of school, who was grounded at home and why, etc.). Further investigation and clarification revealed that much of the discussion that was considered factual and true (e.g., "Corey has been suspended") was not true (Corey was really at home with a case of mononucleosis) and merely speculation.

Emotions mixed with doses of drama were very obvious during the time that I was in the classroom, and I witnessed several outbursts triggered by perceived unfair treatment ("He [the previous period's teacher] never listens to me!"). This comment followed Constantine's being kicked out of a previous class. Further probing uncovered the fact that she had become extremely defiant and disrespectful because the teacher did not "understand' why her personal problems had prevented her from handing in a prescribed assignment. Mr. T. patiently listened to her anger, and then respectfully and objectively clarified the issue and gave her some strategies to work through the crisis.

Ridnouer (2006) reminded us that

> the kids we teach have a lot going on. Consider that they have parents, other family, friends, a bus driver, a principal, seven or eight teachers, various coaches and maybe even a boss who all feel justified in telling them how to behave. Consider that all this is compounded with realities like divorce, violence, and peer, social and economic pressures. A student might have a difficult time responding calmly to one more person telling him to take off his hat. (p. 32)

In terms of meeting what Inlay (2005) referred to as *needs* (p. 41), the learning environment in this room allowed students to take risks, to express emotions and be alone, yet to belong. Ridnouer (2006) added that it is essential that "we, as teachers, exhibit the maturity that our student have not yet attained " (p. 32). Mr. T. certainly modeled this maturity when he dealt with the frequent volatile situations that arose on a day-to-day basis.

In sculpting this learning environment, Mr. T. infused choice as an underlying framework. Students could choose where to sit, with whom to work, even what to read. Choice is such a huge part of this class setting and a topic that will appear many times in later discussions.

Conceptual Framework 2: Reading

I began this journey using the term *reading*—in particular, the reading habits of the adolescent—as the major focus of my research. It was my intention to explore these practices and, consequently, gain a more complete understanding of what occurs when adolescents read. Over the course of my professional reading, however, I have realized that the whole notion of reading has changed substantially during the past 10 or so years, and my horizons have been expanded to include a plethora of terms that encompass the act of making meaning. A discussion of the variations will occur in the latter part of this review, but as a grounding point I will commence with a short review of the complex act of reading.

Birkerts (1994) stated that reading comes from the Anglo Saxon *raedan*, meaning "'to make out, to interpret'" (p. 95), and stressed that "the words on the page don't change, but we do, and our 'reading'—the experience we had over the duration of our encounter with the book—has the plasticity of any memory" (p. 96). Furthermore, "reading is a conversion, a turning of codes into contents" (p. 97).

Radway (1994) wrote, "Reading is not some singular, unitary, mechanical technology, but rather a variable set of dispositions, procedures and interpretive strategies" (p. 292). Both Birkerts (1994) and Radway identified the complexity of the act that has so much impact on the lives of children and adults. It is an expectation of well-meaning parents and society in general that children will embrace reading and journey through life armed with a variety of reading material, but the reality is that the path may be very difficult.

Eisner (1985) discussed reading as "the way people secure meaning from words" (p. 1), and people construct meaning from what he referred to as "forms of representation" (p. 11):

> If what it means to read is to be able to construct meaning from the forms of representation we encounter in our culture, and if what it means to read text is to grasp the multiple ways in which text conveys meaning, then clearly, reading is a creative, not a mechanical enterprise. (p. 11)

Mackey (2002) stated that

> the word 'reading' has always incorporated a number of complicated meanings, from the decoding of the alphabet, to the interpretation of complex instructions and descriptions, to the development of entranced absorption in a fictional universe. Not so long ago, however, the word 'reading' carried at least one

> permanent connotation: the turning of pages and the comprehension of print on paper. (p. 3)

Moreover,

> In contemporary texts, words may be printed or sounded or both. Pictures, still or moving, may augment, contradict or replace words. In many cases, this communicative process continues to entail word recognition alongside the processing of information through other media. (p. 3)

The way that we process, the way that we view the world around us, whether it is visually or auditorily or through other sensory activities, is highly subjective and personal. Eisner's (1985) belief that the reader brings his or her interpretation to the text is similar to Rosenblatt's (1982) statements in regard to the transaction that occurs between reader and author. Rosenblatt believed that the reader brings his or her own past when the act of reading occurs. This personal perspective, combined with the equally personal perspective of the author, results in a unique experience.

The students with whom I worked have very intense personal feelings about nearly everything. Several of the students were very apathetic about their reading preferences, but two of the girls surveyed voiced personal choices. Constantine cited Anne Rice and her fantastic vampire novels, and Hayley also expressed an interest in the high fantasy work of Tolkien. Cyrus leaned towards the nonfiction genre because he prefers to garner information. These three students obviously relate to their chosen te[illegible] in one way or another.

Eisner (1985) also encouraged us to give students opportunities to engage in multiple forms of literacy—not just text, but literacy communicated through the fine arts, such as dance, music, and art. He warned us that reading is not just an isolated activity, but that gaining meaning from a text requires a combination of strategies such as using the imagination so that the child can visualize and perhaps experience what the author is trying to portray. It is necessary for the reader to have sufficient imagination to be able to visualize and create the images that the author is designing. Mackey (2002) took Eisner's work a step further and introduced the concept of media that accompanies the reading act. Students no longer are restricted to simply making meaning from print on a page; instead, they have opportunities to make meaning through music, through film, through computer games and manipulations. They are free to shift back and forth among the various mediums and gather meaning as they go. Mackey reported that "every time the students came into the room, they brought that outside world with them" (p. 2), whether it is the latest electronic gadget strung around their necks or the more traditional paperback or glossy magazine in their backpacks.

Stages and Dimensions of Reading: What Happens When Readers Read?

Appleyard (1990) defined *reading* as "primarily an encounter between a particular reader and a particular text in a particular time and place" (p. 9). He referred to five different roles that readers assume as they mature: reader as player, reader as hero or heroine, reader as thinker, reader as interpreter, and the pragmatic reader. Appleyard's roles reflect that "the whole pattern of reading development . . . has consistently been imagined as the product of the interaction of both maturing cognitive/affective capacities and specific sociocultural opportunities and demands" (p. 122). Reading is a complex act that relies on many factors, including cognitive and environmental.

Robert Protherough (1983) conducted a series of observations and interviews in classrooms and found that the children described the act of reading fiction in a number of ways. He devised a set of models that are influenced by developmental factors and the maturity of the reader. His model includes stages that extend from basic *projection* into a character and situation to the more sophisticated stages where there is an *association* between the book and the reader and the assumption of the role of the *distanced viewer* while he or she is following the action of the plot. Protherough also identified a group of older readers who read with *detached evaluation* and who "understand rather than feel the emotions of the characters" (p. 24). This group of readers can also discuss the effects of literary motifs and authors' styles in an objective manner.

Although Protherough's (1983) and Appleyard's (1990) work can be considered dated, it is important to recognize their contributions and to stress that both theorists recognized the developmental stages through which readers pass. They also realized that readers may move back and forth between the states or stages depending on the text and on the situation in which they find themselves at that time.

Louise Rosenblatt (1978, 1982, 1938/1995) has had a great impact on the field of reading research, and it would be remiss to omit her findings in discussing reading. Her concept of *transaction* between reader and author is groundbreaking work, and Beers (2005) stated that Rosenblatt was a "scholar who single-handedly changed our understanding of the reading process" (p. 5). Rosenblatt (1978) suggested that

> the reader brings to the text his past experience and present personality. Under the magnetism of the ordered symbols of the text, he marshals his resources and crystallizes out from the stuff of memory, thought, and feeling a new order, a new experience, which he sees as the poem. This becomes part of the ongoing stream of his life experience, to be reflected on from any angle important to him as a human being. (p. 12)

This bringing of personal experiences and emotions to the act of reading is essential if true understanding is to occur. Mackey (2002) summed up this relationship, which could almost be considered a covenant:

> Through you the author, I the reader become another I; through you the reader, I the author speak my words in another's voice. I as author write *now*; I as reader read *now*; yet we meet in a third space that is a different *now* for both of us. (p. 165)

Rosenblatt's (1982) efferent stance and aesthetic stance to which readers gravitate in reading are on a continuum, and readers may shift between the two points depending on the purpose of reading. The efferent stance gives the reader something concrete, some new fact or skill to take away, whereas the aesthetic stance allows the reader to savor the experience of reading itself. Aesthetic reading usually occurs in two stages. The first occurs during reading when the reader's transactions with the author stir up memories, sensations, and feelings. This stage is sometimes called *evocation*. The second stage of aesthetic reading occurs when the reader organizes and classifies those feelings and sensations, usually following a period of reflection. This second stage is often referred to as the *response* stage; it acknowledges the need to synthesize and savor what the reader has experienced.

Much of the reading instruction that occurs in classrooms focuses on the efferent stance, with the outcome usually being a completed set of comprehension questions or a detailed plot analysis. Products or projects that are simple to correct and easily assigned grades are often utilized. Determining the level of an aesthetic stance is far more problematic for the multiple-choice/Scantron-driven method of assessment.

Beers (2003b) elaborated on Rosenblatt's stances to include "stance versatility" (p. 269), in which the reader may begin in an efferent stance and then move to an aesthetic stance because the text captures his or her interest. Beers explained that struggling readers seldom move into the aesthetic state because they see reading only as the means of gaining something, whether it is a finished assignment, a good mark on a test, or the scores to last night's hockey game. They have not experienced, as Tovani (2000) suggested, "how great it feels to finish a book" (p. 9).

Many of the students who were involved in this research did not consider themselves readers; in fact, the majority of the subjects reported that they did not read at all. However, this was not true because several self-professed nonreaders actually did read, and their reading could be classified in Rosenblatt's (1982) efferent category in which they read to gain meaning. They search the newspaper for information on possible employment opportunities, they scour the mountains of Christmas flyers for the best deals, and they cited a variety of search engines and research sites that provide information on tattoos or history. Aesthetic reading, however, in the majority of the cases was scarce and could almost be defined as a closed book for them.

Adolescent Reading Patterns

Thomson (1987) conducted an important extensive study on teenage reading habits and organized his findings into six different stages. These stages are also organized on a continuum beginning with "unreflective interest in action" (p. 185), in which plot is key. His next stage, "empathizing" (p. 193), occurs when readers begin to sympathize or relate to the feelings of the characters and begin to understand more deeply why a character will act in a certain manner. "Analogizing" (p. 198) occurs when readers begin to relate their own experiences to the characters to understand better. "Reflecting on the significance of events and behavior" (p. 203) takes place when readers begin to make generalizations about themes or recurring motifs. They also begin to question and examine the behaviors of characters. As readers mature, they begin "reviewing the whole work as a construct" (p. 209) and seeing patterns or motifs that authors use. Thomson's last stage occurs when mature readers begin a "consciously considered relationship with the author" (p. 223) and to "recognize their own reading processes" (p. 223); "a mature reader understands that authors consciously select literary motifs and purposes" (p. 223). In discussing these different stages, Thomson reminded us that "as a reader progresses from one level to the next, she or he does not, snake-like, shed old strategies like a worn-out skin, but develops those strategies for increasingly complex purposes as well as adopting new strategies" (p. 178).

Wilhelm (1997) gave full credit to the work of Thomson (1987) and referred to three categories of response in which adolescents engage when they read literature: evocative dimensions, connective dimensions, and reflective dimensions. In the evocative dimension the reader enters the story world by activating prior knowledge and beginning to make predictions, formulate expectations, and become engaged in the piece. In the connective dimension the reader deciphers clues that the author gives and begins to personalize and empathize with the characters. Wilhelm's reflective dimension occurs when the reader makes decisions about how the text works and how the author has used literary conventions to create meaning.

Wilhelm (1997) concurred with Appleyard (1990) and Protherough (1983) that readers shift between perspectives and may select different dimensions on which to focus depending on their interest and motivation. He also elaborated on the different dimensions while stressing the importance of visualizing. Wilhelm believed that if the reader is unable to visualize—that is, create mental images—then meaning may be lost or nonexistent, and it is very difficult to respond fully. Wilhelm's view on the importance—almost necessity—of visualization in reading is perhaps a little strong because not all competent, successful readers visualize every time they read. Often, visualization is not common. This could be because the technique has never being emphasized, taught, or modeled; or it could simply be that they do not take the time or cannot be bothered to look further than the surface. In other words, the material presented to them may not engage them.

Both Thomson (1987) and Wilhelm (1997, 2003) explored the behavior or characteristics of adolescents who read narrative text by observing and recording the actions of their participants. Zirinsky and Rau (2001) also observed a group of high school students and compiled a list of attributes after they examined the reading histories of a number of these students. They found that

> for teenagers, reading is often intensely social.
> There are arid spells. Reading comes and goes in readers' lives.
> Finding the 'right' book is difficult.
> Reading all the books in a series, or all the books by an author, or all the books of one type is typical for readers.
> Trash and treasure coexist for readers.
> Reading serves a variety of functions in people's lives.
> School reading during junior and senior high school years is sadly rarely meaningful.
> Gender is not neutral where reading is concerned. (p. 23)

Zirinsky and Rau did not mention the need for visualization in reading; in fact, they did not explore the cognitive processes that occur while readers are engaged in the act of reading. Instead, the focus of their work was on ways to motivate and nurture reluctant teenagers to engage them in reading.

The professional writing that abounds on adolescent reading is thorough and comprehensive. Whether it is Wilhelm (1997) or Smith and Wilhelm (2002, 2006), Thomson (1987), Beers (2003) or Ivey and Fisher (2005), they all acknowledged the importance of motivation, interest, and personal engagement. This I found to be very true when I observed the discussion patterns of my group of students. If the topic being discussed—for example, movie characters—caught their interest, then the discussion was bright and energetic. On the other hand, if the topic was not particularly stimulating, as was the discussion on the use of the comma, then the students appeared to go into almost "auto pilot," and their answers were terse and superficial.

Current Reality in Classrooms

> School goes grinding along with its learning process. (Pennac, 1994, p. 67)

Pennac (1994) recounted the schooling of his son in dismal terms: "It's written in stone in every land: pleasure has no business in school, and knowledge gained must be the fruit of deliberate suffering" (p. 91). He condemned the practices that occur in many English classrooms: "Books are not written so that our sons and daughters can compose essays on them" (p. 161). Furthermore, "Through their long years of education, grade school, and high school, students are made to produce more than enough analysis and commentary to frighten them away from books" (p. 161). Bushman and Haas (2001) agreed: "It seems that schools have accomplished just the opposite of what they intended to do: They have turned students off from reading rather than made them lifelong readers" (p. 3). The major reason for students' turning away is the practice of teachers who "fail to choose literature that enables students to become emotionally and cognitively involved in what they read" (p. 3). Bushman and Haas described how Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* or *Macbeth*, usually part of the prescribed curriculum, are taught: "Teachers' drag students through the play scene by scene over a month-long period" (p. 3), and "most students are simply unable to connect the text with their goals, level of development, and experience" (p. 3).

Thomson (1987) commented on the boredom that students exhibit in many of our classes:

> What boredom really means to these students is an inability or unwillingness to participate in the creation of textual meaning, a failure to comprehend texts by filling in their gaps. Comprehension really means that the text answers the questions readers ask in their heads at they read. (p. 187)

Beers (2003) and Tovani (2000) found that struggling or reluctant readers do not ask questions while reading. Durkin (1993; as cited in Beers, 2003) referred to this questioning, inferring, and predicting as the "internal text" that connects the reader with "external text" (p. 63), which is the writing that the author presents to the reader. Without engagement between text and reader, meaning is lost.

Broaddus and Ivey (2002) listed a number of factors that can contribute to middle school students' struggle with reading tasks: lack of motivation, limited vocabulary, and poor comprehension and decoding skills. Moreover, many of these students also lack background knowledge, which we know is a prerequisite for effective reading. Why would students choose to spend time on an activity that can be so frustrating? In an earlier article, Ivey and Broaddus (2001) stated that the middle school student is presented with teacher-selected materials that, although well meant, are narrow in scope.

William Bintz (1993) raised his concern that

> year after year, I have asked myself why students lose interest in reading. Why do they lose both "the skill and the will" to read when it is clear that both traits are necessary to function as a strategic reader in a complex society? (p. 604)

He conducted a study to find out why students were not reading in high school and devised a portrait of three distinct readers: avid, passive, and reluctant. Avid readers have positive role models and see reading as a tool for learning and enjoyment. Passive readers, on the other hand, do not actually seek out opportunities to read and rarely read at home, but they do acknowledge that reading holds some value. The reluctant can read in some cases, but will not or simply avoid reading whenever possible. They resist because, in part, "students [have] little if any voice in creating reading curricula" (p. 613). There is little opportunity for any of these readers to select materials; however, the avid reader might be sufficiently engaged in reading and therefore not as obviously resistant to the selected items.

When I examined the comments from the subjects in my research, I found that I could fit all six students into one of Blintz's (1993) categories. Two of my subjects I would identify as "avid," although their reading was determined by personal choice of materials and did not include school-related items. Two other students fit into the "passive" camp, although one boy in particular reported reading so much online that I could almost move him into the "avid" category. Two of the students fit into the final category of "reluctant"; one in particular avoided reading at any cost.

Besides the revered "canon" of readings that have little to do with their own lives, many of today's adolescents are still being delivered a menu of dry and tasteless grammar lessons. Maxwell and Meiser (2001) stated that "researchers continue to tell us what many classroom teachers already know: Practicing skills in textbooks or worksheets doesn't work. The skills fail to transfer when students are engaged in the messy business of composing a full essay" (p. 297). Maxwell and Meiser summarized a variety of research studies and reiterated that "learning terminology and rules, diagramming sentences, filling in blanks and worksheets, and taking quizzes . . . have little or no effect on student competency and performance" (p. 297).

Probst (1987) also condemned classroom practices in which students "do not read for enjoyment, for enlargement of their understanding, or from a desire to appreciate the classics" (p. 22); instead, they focus on "issues of format, spelling, grammar and other surface features rather than on content" (p. 22).

Tovani (2000) painted a depressing picture: "By ninth grade, many students have been defeated by test scores, letter grades and special groupings. Struggling readers are embarrassed by their labels and often perceive reading as drudgery" (p. 9). She categorized these students into two groups: "resistive," to whom Beers (1996) referred as *aliterates*—those students who can read but choose not to—and "the word callers" those students who can decode words, but fail to comprehend what they have read (Beers 2003; Stanford 2006). Classrooms in many cases are driven by thoughtless, meaningless activities and lessons, so it is not surprising that many students choose to simply "opt out." This lack of motivating, engaging learning experiences combined with the fragile ego of the adolescent can lead to further difficulties.

The nature of adolescents, who are so conscious of peer approval, often prevents them from taking risks to avoid being embarrassed if they make a mistake. Pennac (1994) referred to this behavior as "fear— . . . fear of not understanding, fear of the wrong answer, fear of the reading police, fear of English as a heavy, opaque subject. Fear smears the sentences of the books and drowns the meaning in the details" (p. 157). In settings such as this, students prefer to be invisible. Tovani (2000) found this to be true in classrooms where she "frequently stood in front of large classes of students sitting passively waiting for me to fill them up with knowledge" (p. 76). These students have had years of experience with teachers armed with a canon of texts and the requisite handouts and worksheets, and many are now opting out or simply waiting for the teacher to supply the "correct" interpretation of the poem or novel. Bushman and Haas (2001) reiterated this criticism: "English teachers often mistakenly think they are teaching literacy when in fact they are teaching and testing students on how well they can determine what the teacher wants" (p. 52). Teachers enable these students to remain disengaged and passive and congratulate themselves when the students "parrot" their responses.

The stress on teachers to be accountable and ensure that they meet curriculum outcomes has altered the tone in many classrooms. Even though competent educators know that discussions are an essential component of English programs, timelines and deadlines compete, and often the simplistic notion of "Give them a worksheet" prevails. In my own school where there is a team of very knowledgeable English teachers, grammar booklets are still being reproduced in bulk; and class novels, with everyone reading the same novel, are still a part of programs. Ivey and Fisher (2005) wondered "whether a whole class needs to read the same book at the same time and whether this practice tends to produce engaged, interested students who are extending their knowledge" (p. 11). Class novels and handouts have a place but should not be the only instructional tool. A balanced approach should be the goal of students' engaging with each other and with authentic texts to increase their competence and enjoyment.

Bridging Home and School Literacies

Hull and Schultz (2002) stated:

> In public discourse, literacy has long been associated with schooling. Talk about literacy crises is often accompanied by calls for better schools and more rigorous curricula, and images of reading and writing are closely connected to school-based or essayist forms of literacy. However, when we widen the lens of what we

> consider literacy and literate activities, homes, communities, and workplaces become sites for literacy use (p. 11).

Hull and Schultz clearly delineated the conflict that is occurring in our homes and our schools. Our schools are still entrenched in the paper-pen form of literacy. Certainly we have managed to install a few computer "labs," where students can engage in forms of "appropriate" tasks, and in some situations genuine learning does actually occur. Our school libraries struggle with the frustrating lack of resources, yet miraculously still provide relevant and interesting materials for students. Whether students use this resource is another question. The students with whom I work, however, have definite outside-of-school reading interests and rely heavily on multimedia forms of communication. They have a variety of electronic musical accoutrements; and MSN, Nexopia, and Webcams are often interspersed with the indispensable cell phone (with all of its capabilities) as a means of keeping in touch. Public library cards, unlike in earlier times, are valued not for access to books, but for access to a variety of electronic media and to the Internet for those who do not have home privileges (for a variety of reasons; not necessarily simply a lack of a computer).

Everyday literacy experiences have certainly changed over the years for adolescents, and King and O'Brien (2002) warned that

> adolescent learners are caught in a literacy Catch-22. They are the likely beneficiaries of a new world of information. At the same time, schools, rooted in a tradition that privileges print, may devalue or even prohibit the use of their students' newfound expertise with language and literacy of information technologies. (p. 40)

Print is the dominating force in schools, and teachers hold the power to determine what is or is not appropriate. King and O'Brien (2002) cautioned that many teachers are not nearly as "savvy in multimedia and multiliteracies" (p. 41) as their students are and thus may resist accepting or even valuing students' abilities. The power-brokering system that exists in many of our schools is not about to be disrupted with the epiphany that students may be better informed than their teachers. Instead, many teachers will still continue to extol the virtues of teaching the "canon." As an interesting aside, Mark Twain (as cited in Bushman & Haas, 2001) made the astute observation that "classics [are] books people praise but don't read" (p. 156); yet students are still subjected to lists of approved novels and lock-step anthologies.

King and O'Brien (2002) gave a final warning that "our youth, who are increasingly inattentive and disinterested in school, are increasingly developing an unsanctioned, articulate and even masterful digitally literate, critically literate, and intermedial competence that schools are slow to recognize or adapt to" (p. 50). They reported that students are "jamming" (i.e., a form of opting out) and that "the less schools get their attention, the more they will jam" (p. 50).

Hagood, Stevens, and Reinking (2002) described the "rupture between how literacies are defined and valued in schools" (p. 81) and lamented that this division "does not bode well for the adolescents who are not given opportunities to develop the literacies of the post-literate world within the school" (p. 81). It is not enough to offer classes in technology support that are usually comprised of computer how-to lessons; today's adolescent needs more encouragement to explore and needs to see that all forms of literacy are valued and accepted.

In many situations reading has been displaced by video games, the telephone, MSN, soccer, or "hanging out." But before we complain too loudly, it is important to include the discussions of Beers (2003), Street (1997), Harste (2003), and Probst (2003) on multiple or social literacies. It needs to be understood that reading is only one small facet of literacy, which Beers (2003) defined as

> our students' abilities to read critically and respond appropriately to the vast variety of texts that surround them daily. The Internet, e-mail, hypertexts, e-zines, online live chat, web casts, magazines, textbooks, trade books, comic books, posters, billboards, television, radio—the list goes on. Many of these texts are constructed daily almost before their eyes. (p. 4)

Street agreed: "The academic and schooled literacy of dominant western elites represents only one form of literacy amongst many" (p. 135). "Literacy remains a sign by which we know the world we live in. It refers not simply to the skills of reading and writing but to the way we think about ourselves as working and thinking beings" (p. 138). Similarly, Harste wrote:

> School literacy may be very different from 'everyday literacy' or even literacy as the parents of your students may be thinking about it. Instead of thinking about literacy as an entity (something you either have or don't have), thinking about literacy as social practice can be revolutionary (p. 8).

Smith and Wilhelm (2002) conducted a study of 49 male students from four very distinct sites in three different states. They included boys from an "urban high school made up almost entirely of African American and Puerto Rican students; a diverse comprehensive regional suburban high school; a rural middle school and high school; and a private all boys middle school and high school" (p. xxi). They found that even though the boys "valued school-based reading in theory, they often rejected it in practice because school-based reading was not characterized by the qualities that marked the activities (both literate and not) that the boys pursued out of school" (p. 17). The boys often "rejected and resisted it [school literacy] in actual practice because it was not related to immediate interests and needs" (p. 94). They viewed reading in two ways: as in-school literacy and as home/outside/real-world literacy. Wilhelm (2003) stated, "Life literacy on the other hand mattered immeasurably and immediately. Reading and writing outside of school was pleasurable, challenging, immediately useful and functional" (p. 48). The boys in the study simply endured school-related reading, but they valued and even savored the out-of-school reading, which resulted in animated and vibrant discussions with peers. Their "free" time was also taken up with a cornucopia of electronic gadgets that served as communication tools and pleasurable diversions.

The group of students with whom I worked during this journey would certainly agree with the students whom Wilhelm (2003) interviewed that literacy experiences in the school settings vary tremendously from home literacy experiences, and these students were well aware of the differences. The majority "tolerated" the activities and instruction that occurred in school. Many of them completed the readings and assignments to some degree, but they almost appeared to be simply putting in time until they could experience the real world that exists outside of the school—rather a dismal outlook when school takes up so much of their waking hours.

The Balancing Act

We are well aware of the difficulties that students are encountering with tedious, dull materials that have no relevance to the intricate, vibrant lifestyles of many of our adolescents. Schools often become the enemy, a form of prison where the inmates are subjected to days of dry, meaningless lessons and activities. It is astounding that, considering the vast amount of professional writing on the topic of adolescent engagement, not just literacy, few changes have occurred in the delivery of education. Irvin, Buehl, and Klemp (2003) cautioned:

> The high school is the last chance for educators to help students become proficient readers and writers. Students who are confident in their ability to read and write hold the key to independent learning. What is necessary to enable students to achieve this goal? Teachers must understand their content; understand the physical, emotional, social, intellectual, and moral needs of students; and understand the nature of learning and the teaching of language and content. (p. 15)

Teachers may understand the content they teach, but they may not really understand the complex, emotional lives of their students. Bushman and Haas (2001) explained:

> Young adults evolve through this period called adolescence. Although there are no systematic initiation rites for passage into adulthood in this society as there may be in other societies, young people have some experiences that seem to indicate that they are moving through this period into adulthood (p. 25).

Bushman and Haas supported the use of appropriate literature to assist adolescents:

> Books may offer to young adults what our society does not. Reading books helps young adults in their journey—their rites of passage—into adulthood. Books provide experiences that may help young adults through their adolescent years. Providing young people with young adult literature not only in the bookstores but also in the classroom is imperative if we want adolescents to read about more experiences than they could have on their own. In addition, this literature serves young people in their struggle with identity, with their relationships with adults, and with their choices, which often suggest their concern with moral question of right and wrong (p. 25).

Lesesne (2007) reminded us that

> today's adolescents are connected beyond the walls of their bedrooms and their classrooms through email, instant messaging (IMing), social networking, blogs, and personal web pages. They connect with other adolescents around the world via email. They download music from other countries. They get their news feed via online sources. Adolescence is all about speed and conveniences and immediacy. However, there is more to the changing nature of adolescence than that. Terrorism alerts, videos of bodies being pulled from the rubble here and

> abroad, people stranded on rooftops for days in the flooded areas of the Gulf Coast, and politicians who suggest anyone who disagrees with policy is giving comfort to the enemy—these images, these messages, echo [Bob] Dylan's words in a most chilling way. Indeed, the times are changing. These changes, I suggest, mean that adolescents themselves have changed. (p. 62)

"It makes sense, then," continued Loesene, "that the books we offer this new generation should also reflect this paradigm shift in how adolescents negotiate their interaction with one another, their way through school and life and their reading" (p. 63).

Ross (2001) stated that "at every stage, choice permeates the topic of reading for pleasure, starting with the initial development in childhood" (p. 8). "Being able to choose successfully among materials is an important skill that is never directly taught but is learned by readers who teach themselves" (p. 8). Furthermore, "Each successful book choice makes it more likely that the beginning reader will want to repeat the pleasurable experience by reading something further" (p. 9), and they will continue on what Ross referred to as a "long apprenticeship in reading" (p. 18). Her recommendations are very similar to those of Chambers (1969) and Allington (2001) in that students must be given choices. They do not want to listen to teachers tell them what is good; they want to find out on their own.

Krashen (1993) extolled the value of free voluntary reading or, to use his acronym, FVR. He stressed the need for regular, sustained silent reading in every classroom, in every school setting, so that "higher levels of proficiency may be reached" (p. 1). In addition,

> for school-age children, FVR means no book report, no questions at the end of the chapter, and no looking up every vocabulary word. FVR means putting down a book you don't like and choosing another one instead. It is the kind of reading highly literate people do obsessively all the time. (p. x)

Woven with a similar thread is Pennac's (1994) belief that "when it comes to reading, we grant ourselves every right in the book, including those we withhold from the young people we claim to be teaching" (p. 171). His wonderful, optimistic list of reading rights should be enshrined in every English classroom:

> The right to not read.
> The right to skip pages.
> The right to not finish a book.
> The right to reread.
> The right to read anything.
> The right to escapism.
> The right to read anywhere.
> The right to browse.
> The right to read out loud.
> The right to not defend your tastes. (p. 171)

Pennac advised, "If we want our sons, our daughters, all young people to read, we must grant them the same rights we grant ourselves" (p. 171). Although no one can argue with the philosophy behind his suggestions, we run into problems if and when students act on them. In the results-driven classrooms in today's schools, how can we permit students not to read or to read anything when in the real world we are expected to prepare them for high-stakes testing and report cards and eventually assist them in assuming a meaningful place in society? We are accountable to parents, school districts, and Alberta Education, not to mention the students themselves. It is difficult to justify allowing students to choose not to read at school. What if they never read? It is terrifying to think what the result might be.

There is no argument about the need for students simply to read. Beers (2003) used the analogy of a football team who require practices to learn the skills of the game and mesh as a team. Reading is no different: Good readers get better because they read. We know this to be a fact, yet the reality is that students do not read enough in school, and what they do read often has nothing to do with the real worlds in which they live. Many of the adolescents who enter our classrooms on a daily basis are completely unaware of the strategies for reading. They have not, despite the efforts of diligent and conscientious teachers, joined Frank Smith's (1987) "Literacy Club"; and as Kropp (1993) reminded us, "Reading itself is not specifically taught in high school; it's simply expected" (p. 119). Modeling and providing opportunities for students to assume a role in their own learning are necessary so that students can begin to succeed. Workbook assignments will not model these strategies, and teachers need to take back their classrooms and teach in a manner that they know is valid and authentic.

Closing the Reading Discussion

Dewey (as cited in Maxwell & Meiser, 2001) believed that "we learn because of a current need or curiosity, and that unless goals are set by student themselves, little learning occurs" (p. 5). In traditional schools we are still setting the goals and teaching in a fragmented, isolated manner. If we want our students to become lovers of books, we must open the door so that they can experience what we do.

Kropp (1993) described reading as "dreaming. Reading is entering a world of imagination shared between reader and author. Reading is getting beyond the words to the story or the meaning underneath" (p. 24), which captures the transaction between reader and text to which Rosenblatt (1982) referred. Wright (200l) suggested that "some Canadian students may temporarily lose the taste for pleasure reading while they are in school" (p. 157), but they are not "at risk of 'losing' their accumulated reading skills through neglect until late in adulthood" (p. 10). I believe that this is true, especially when I am in an airport or in a waiting room. Looking around, I see adults reading magazines, novels, or the newspaper, so obviously the skills have not been lost during adolescence. Wright recommended that we value what students are reading, whether it is a *Snowboard* magazine, a Stephen King novel, or CD inserts. It is only by encouraging reading that improvement will continue.

Finally, Probst (2003) asserted, "If there are multiple literacies, then they are not just the literacies of the school" (p. 14). We must broaden our print-dominant environment that cocoons our schools and recognize what is really going on in our adolescents' lives. Prensky (2006) agreed:

> As educators, we must take our cues from our students' 21st century innovations and behaviors, abandoning, in many cases, our own predigital instincts and comfort zones. Teachers must practice putting engagement before content when teaching. They need to laugh at their own digital immigrant accents, pay attention to how their students learn, and value and honor what their students know. They must remember that they are teaching in the 21st century. This means encouraging decision making among students, involving students in designing instruction, and getting input from students about how *they* would teach. (p. 10)

Prensky added that "digital tools are like extension of students' brains" (p. 11) and that "our schools should be teaching kids how to program, filter knowledge, and maximize the features and connectivity of their tools" (p. 10).

Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, and Rycik (1999) issued a further caution that should be heeded:

> Adolescents entering the adult world in the 21st century will read and write more than at any other time in human history. They will need advanced levels of literacy to perform their jobs, run their households, act as citizens, and conduct their personal lives. They will need literacy to cope with the flood of information they will find everywhere they turn. They will need literacy to feed their imaginations so they can create the world of the future. In a complex and sometimes even dangerous world, their ability to read will be crucial. Continual instruction beyond the early grades is needed (p. 3).

Vacca (2002) concurred: "We can ill afford to marginalize adolescent literacy, pushing it to the edges of public debate and policy, at a time when the literacy development of young adolescents and teenagers is more critical than ever" (p. 185).

Those of us who get so much pleasure from reading, I believe, are fortunate. Using my own personal viewpoint, I am delighted when I can stuff my suitcase with novels and then while away those hours reading when I am lucky enough to have a few days off. I have always been a reader, and it is of tremendous concern that so many of our adolescents are struggling and are not achieving competence in a field that is so essential. I acknowledge the pleasure that I garner from reading; however, I am very aware that this pleasure, although valuable, is not the only virtue gained from reading. In our fast-moving world, literacy is an essential need. We are surrounded with tasks that require reading, perhaps not in the traditional format of paper and print, but, nevertheless, decoding in one form or another is required. I agree with Vacca's (2002) view that it is time to focus on encouraging adolescents to establish reading patterns that will assist them in making meaning of their diverse worlds. I agree also with Prensky's (2006) view that it is our duty to embrace and, what is more important, to instruct critical usage and examination of multimodal materials.

Conceptual Framework 3: Pedagogical Perspectives

Originally, when I planned this research, I delved into the extensive professional literature on the topic of literacy and adolescent characteristics because that is the focus of my research. As I embarked on my journey, however, another continuing theme began to emerge. When I questioned the students involved in the project about the Plus program, they often responded by discussing characteristics, traits, and instructional strategies related to the teacher, not the subject or content. They discussed the dynamics that created when they enter the classroom and the flexibility and accommodation (perhaps not in those terms). It was at this point that I felt a need to explore some of the literature on effective, successful teaching and learning. I have been a teacher for over 20 years, and I felt that I had a fairly accurate picture of what an effective, competent teacher looks like, but the research revealed a more complex, but clearer view. This discussion is by no means exhaustive, but it is my hope that what I present will be relevant and useful.

I have divided my readings into a number of themes or subject headings and present them as relevant factors that contribute to learning experiences for students in classroom settings. I selected these themes or subdivisions from the vast collection of theory, research, and professional writings and have narrowed them down to three topics. Classroom climate (Maniates, Doerr, & Golden, 2001; van Manen, 2002) is one factor, connecting (Blum, 2005; Gootman, 2003; Mendes, 2003) is another, and personal best (Mendes, 2003) is the third topic that I will discuss in the next section. The three themes that I have selected are certainly not clearly delineated from each other and could very well be included under one umbrella, perhaps with a label of *effective classrooms*. Other labels could be assigned, but I hope that these three topics will add to the discussion.

Classroom Climate

I define *classroom climate* as an environment in which students may be provided with opportunities to grow and learn. Climate encompasses physical as well as aesthetic and emotional attributes. van Manen (2002) spoke of "atmosphere . . . that is sensitive to the need of intimacy, security and shelter as well as to the enticing call of a big world of public life and mysterious impersonal forces" (p. 72). Students—in particular, adolescents—are reluctant to learn when they are concerned with being safe or looking stupid in front of their peers.

Maniates et al. (2001) stated that a

> positive classroom climate, one that feels socially and emotionally safe to each child and family, is as critical to students' success in school as a strong academic program is. . . . In order for students to take the risks inherent in learning, they must experience a classroom atmosphere that is consistently inclusive and intellectually challenging. (p. xiii)

A classroom that encourages risk taking allows students to practice decision making and encourages inquiry and constructive dialogue, which should be a goal of all educators. van Manen (1991) compared the school setting with that of the family and stressed that the school should have the same security and stability. van Manen (2002) cautioned that, because "school is a place where children explore aspects of the human world" (p. 72), it is necessary that children feel safe prior to embarking on their exploration.

According to Wehlage (1987; as cited in Maniates et al., 2001):

> It is generally assumed that high school dropouts are unmotivated, of low ability who come from families who do not value educational achievement. Research has found that, rather than personal or family deficits, a prime factor in students' decision to drop out is school climate that they perceive to be uncaring, racist, and unwelcoming. (p. xiii)

Wessler (2003) felt that "students want to be treated as individuals, to have their personal experiences with traumatic events valued and to have their own opinions validated" (p. 42). Langer (2002), in her extensive review of effective literacy programs, discussed communities in which

> students are encouraged to participate and to feel a sense of ownership about their writing and learning, often choosing the topic, approach, or form of their work. They feel respected and cared for when they see their teacher's responses to their journals and other writing assignments. (p. 159)

According to Langer, such communities contain "the climate of respect, openness, supportiveness, and participation [and therefore] foster language skills . . . [and] encourage students and teachers to be willing to experiment and take risks, and thus grow and learn" (pp. 159-160). Wolk (2003) encouraged teachers to build a sense of community in which "the curriculum and a shared sense of purposeful learning help create community" (p. 15) and "there is a caring relationship between teachers and students" (p. 15). The creation of safe learning environments in which students are given opportunities to grow and learn academically as well as emotionally is an essential requirement in schools.

The classroom where I conducted the research was, in my opinion, a safe place for at-risk adolescents to take risks and expose vulnerable psyches. Mr. T. expected his students to behave in a respectful manner and did not tolerate putdowns or ridiculing. He recognized how fragile many of the students were and often utilized what Ridnouer (2006) referred to as a "sympathetic ear" (p. 82) by listening and extending gentle, genuine guidance when students requested it. Many of the discussions centered around their out-of-school lives, and the students felt safe enough to reveal themselves. Master K. spoke frankly about conflict at home and in his community, Steve voiced his frustration with the demands of other courses and teachers, and Constantine confessed her grief at losing a good friend to cancer. Mr. T. often used humor to lighten tension, and he seemed to know innately when to speak and when to listen.

Students spend a considerable part of their formative years in schools, so fostering a safe climate is essential because, disturbingly, the school may be a safer place than some homes. The classroom is a mini society with rules and constraints, and in many instances traditions and common beliefs. This is why it is so important to ensure that all are welcome and all are safe. A great deal has been done to address bullying issues, and it is imperative that dignity and worth be at the foundation of the structure.

Connecting and Building Relationships

The creation and maintenance of a positive school climate is one facet of this section; however, linked closely to climate is the concept of connecting and building relationships. Blum (2005) defined *school connectedness* as

> an academic environment in which students believe that adults in the school care about their learning and about them as individuals. . . . Students who experience school connectedness, like school, feel that they belong, believe teachers care about them and their learning, believe that education matters, have friends at school, believe that discipline is fair, and have opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities (pp. 16-17).

Mendes (2003) emphasized:

> To open the relationship door, teachers need to understand their students' world. To build relationships in the classroom, teachers need to know their students, their own strengths and limitations, and how to connect with students by demonstrating genuine interest in them (p. 59).

Maniates et al. (2001) suggested that "one of the first elements in the formation of a climate for learning is one that seems to be the simplest—that the teacher knows and develops a personal rapport with each child" (p. 8).

Alvermann and Phelps (1994), Wilhelm (1997), Hinchmann, Alvermann, Boyd, Brozo, and Vacca (2003) and Wolk (2003) addressed the importance of being aware of students' background, beliefs, prior knowledge, and home environment before even attempting to introduce learning. A quick inventory could provide some of the necessary information, but teenagers are verbal, expressive creatures, and those students who struggle with pen-and-pencil tasks might not welcome having to make a written response.

Zirinsky and Rau (2001) used both written and oral methods to garner valuable data when they spoke to students. Smith and Wilhelm (2002) also used oral interviews to elicit their participants' thoughts and reflections. Taking time to listen and show interest is important, and students respond accordingly.

Mendes (2003) noted that "students do respond just because we care" (p. 56) and that "earning respect of students is not enough. Students must perceive that we care, and even that we like them deep down as people. . . . They will work harder for someone they like than for someone they simply respect" (p. 56). Wessler (2003) agreed that teachers "must value students by valuing their emotions and their lives outside the classroom. When students believe that teachers respect and care about their feelings, they are more likely to respect themselves and their classmates" (p. 42). Sizer (1999) summed up the discussion: "We cannot teach students well if we do not know them well. At its heart, personalized learning required profound shifts in our thinking about education and schooling" (p. 6).

Connecting with students is imperative, but teachers must also make connections between what they already know and what is being presented. Dewey (1949/1990) stressed the importance of linking the real-world experiences of the learner to the classroom curriculum so that the learning becomes more personally relevant. Scaffolding new learning experiences onto older ones helps students with comprehension and retention. Vacca (2002) explained:

> In a social constructivist paradigm the experiences and views of students and teachers within a classroom environment are at the forefront of learning and teaching in content classrooms. Knowledge is not dispensed from teacher to student or from text to students, but is always under construction. The social context of the classroom affects the way students interact with the teacher, the text and with one another (p. 193).

Taking the time and expending the effort to establish a professional yet caring relationship with students is often overlooked in the rush to prepare them for tests and life in general. Too often teachers and administrators get so caught up with the content of curriculums that there is no opportunity to engage in the personal, profound joy of sharing knowledge and life experiences, which is the crux of real teaching.

Mr. T.'s easygoing, laidback mannerisms allow students to connect with each other and with him. Meeting them at the door and asking what appear to be casual, yet valuable questions strengthen the connections. Listening to Jennai complain about having to move away and leave her friends or Constantine's complaints about unfair teachers was all part of the interactions that occurred. And as a result of the conversations, Mr. T.'s responses indicated empathy, yet practical advice. Constantine, in her final interview, summed up this connection simply: "You know he cares."

Personal Best

It is very important that students be safe and develop positive relationships with the teacher and their peers; however, it cannot be forgotten that schools are in the business of teaching. Accountability is an integral component of school performance, and rigorous, challenging learning situations are essential. Helping students to attain levels that meet or exceed expectations is paramount. Differentiating instruction and assessment to heighten individual strengths and abilities and support individual difficulties is the primary responsibility of an effective, caring teacher. Maniates et al. (2001) charged that

> too much focus on climate equals summer camp; too much academic drill equals boot camp. Good teachers know it is never an either/or situation. Consciously constructing a community in the classroom allows teachers to balance the needs of the individual with the needs of the group; the need for standards with the children's developmental needs; the need for passing tests with the need to develop a love of learning and the willingness to work hard toward one's personal

> best. An academic program and a caring environment complement one another in a community of learners. (p. xiv)

Langer (2002) referred to engendering caring attitudes so that all share the ethos of caring. In her longitudinal study of effective literacy programs, Langer noted that the effective schools in her study had teachers who care about their students and about the people with whom they work. Effective schools also held team meetings in which they discussed students who were struggling. The teachers cared about the students, but also cared about the curricular side and constantly monitored grades and progress and challenged students to reach their potential.

During my time at Mountainview I often stayed after school and was fortunate to be able to sit in on a number of meetings between Madame M. and Mr. T. Sometimes they would talk about personal interests or what movie to see, but often they spoke in a professional manner about the students in the ELA 10-2 Plus as well as the students in Madame M's ELA 20-2 Plus program. In some cases Mr. T. had taught some of the ELA 20-2 Plus students and could offer background or personal information, but usually they would simply discuss ways of assisting struggling students. They were both very focused on getting students to attend class, and they were also very conscious of the need to build capacity because there is no ELA 30-2 Plus program, and students will need to be prepared with confidence and adequate skills to successfully challenge diploma exams. I believe that both teachers genuinely care for their students and conscientiously work to facilitate learning.

Smith and Wilhelm (2006) referred to Csikszentmihalyi (1990) and the importance of *flow* experiences:

> According to Csikszentmihalyi, flow experiences occur when they provide a sense of control and competence, a challenge that requires and appropriate level of skill, clear goals and feedback, and a focus on the immediate experience. where competence, self control and challenge are key attributes to learning. (p. 3)

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) stated:

> We have all experienced times when, instead of being buffeted by anonymous forces, we do feel in control of our actions, masters of our own fates. On the rare occasions that it happens, we feel a sense of exhilaration, a deep sense of enjoyment that is long cherished and that becomes a memory for what life should be like. (p. 3)

Not all of the students whom we meet will graduate and become university scholars, and we hope that they will not all drop out during high school, slip onto the street, and never open a book again. As teachers, we are inspired by hope. We hope that we are giving students the necessary support and guidance to live productive, rewarding lives. We hope that we are providing safe, gentle classrooms in which diversity is acknowledged and valued. We hope that students have an opportunity to experience Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) flow and are engaged by learning and mastering new things. Both Mr. T. and Madame M. are teachers of hope.

Conclusion

Kaplan and Owrings (2002) distinguished between teacher quality and teaching quality and described teacher quality as everything that the teacher brings into the classroom. Within the context of this research, teacher quality requires that teachers be aware of the unique characteristics of the adolescent and well versed in the concepts of literacy and multiliteracies in which students are immersed. Teaching quality, on the other hand, refers to what teachers do with all of the traits, characteristics, content knowledge, certification, and bags of tricks once they are in the classroom. In this context it means that teachers provide that safe harbor in which the fragile world of the adolescent is nurtured and engaged.

Kaplan and Owrings (2002) also recommended that, because students are not empty receptors, teachers must connect new learning opportunities with prior knowledge. They used the term *flexible* to describe the necessary nature of the responsive classroom teacher. Flexibility is essential in dealing with adolescents, and I mention it frequently in later discussions.

The role of a classroom teacher in this new millennium is one of a shape shifter garbed in a series of disguises. Teachers must assume an accountability cloak so that when provincial testing results are released, they will be adequately covered and their students will be at an "acceptable" level. They must also drape themselves in an empathetic cloak so that they recognize and value differences between children and differentiate whenever necessary. Next, they must don the flexibility cloak so that they challenge brighter students so that they do not become bored and provide students with lesser ability with motivating, yet appropriate materials so that they will grow. The largest cloak, however, is the superhero cloak, which helps teachers to be problem solvers, diagnosticians, innovators, and curriculum and public-relations experts. To top it all off, they are quirky human beings with feelings, families, and real lives. No one would dare argue that sometimes the tasks can be overwhelming.

CHAPTER 3:

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN: MAKING A PLAN

Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this qualitative research was to explore students' reading experiences while they were enrolled in the ELA 10-2 Plus program at a large urban high school. Through conversation and collaborative interpretation with the students, I sought a heightened awareness and a deepened understanding of student engagement and participation in literacy activities in this English classroom.

Research Questions

The main question that drove this research was, What are students' reading experiences while enrolled in the ELA 10-2 Plus program? The research was guided by the following questions:

1. In what ways might an exploration and observation of students' reading experiences in an ELA 10-2 Plus program offer new insights into adolescent reading patterns and interactions with text?
2. How might such a study help teachers and teacher educators gain insight into productive pedagogical strategies and approaches for students who appear disenchanted with in-school reading?

Research Methodology

Rationale

I decided to use interpretive qualitative research in the hope that this methodology would facilitate the gathering of rich and vibrant data. Qualitative research works best in human research contexts where, according to Leedy and Ormrod (2001), "there isn't necessarily a single, ultimate Truth to be discovered. Instead, there may be multiple perspectives" (p. 147). Leedy and Ormrod also explained that qualitative research strives for a better understanding of complex situations to build theory from the ground up and that "we must dig deep to get a complete understanding of the phenomenon we are studying" (p. 147). Similarly, Bogdan and Biklen (1992) stated that the qualitative researcher's "goal is to better *understand* human behavior and experience" (p. 49).

Case Study

Qualitative research is diverse and multifaceted and allows the researcher to interpret and make sense of the experiences that people, including the researcher, bring into the study. There are several different types of qualitative research, and after reviewing these categories, I decided to select case study as the methodology that would provide me with the structure required to obtain a rich bank of data.

Case study, when it is used in an interpretive/constructivist paradigm, is a thorough and detailed study of a group or situation. In a case study the researcher uses a variety of methods to gather information, often relying on *triangulation*, or multiple means of gathering data, to provide validity. Triangulation, according to Mertens (1998), "involves checking information that has been collected from different source or methods for consistency of evidence across sources of data" (p. 183). Creswell (1994) described the use of triangulation as a way of helping to neutralize the bias that often occurs when the researcher or investigator is engaged as a participant observer. Foreman (1948; as cited in Merriam, 2001) identified the goal as "to establish validity through pooled judgment" (p. 204). Denzin and Lincoln (1994) also referred to triangulation as a means of achieving an accurate picture of the experience. Creswell (1994) acknowledged that this multilevel data gathering is a start, but cautioned that "several simultaneous activities engage the attention of the researcher: collecting information from the field, sorting information into a story or picture, and writing the qualitative text" (p. 153). In using triangulation, I gathered data through observations, the formal Personal Reading History (Appendix C), and subsequent one-on-one interviews and focus-group session.

I chose to conduct a case study because the situation was clearly delineated, clearly discernible, or, in Merriam's (2001) words, "bounded" (p. 27) to this group of participants. Creswell (1994) described a case study as one in which

> the researcher explores a single entity or phenomenon ('the case') bounded by time and activity (a program, event process, institution, or social group) and collects detailed information by using a variety of data collection procedures during a sustained period of time. (p. 12)

According to Merriam (1998), case studies are particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic. My case study was particularistic because I focused on a particular group of students in a particular class at a particular time. All of the participants were enrolled in an English class that ran during the first semester of the 2003/2004 school year. They were bound together in a common space, at a common time, with a common teacher who facilitated their learning. The curriculum outcomes were the same for all students, although examples of differentiation were apparent. Their personal reading experiences and capabilities were not bounded, however, because the group exhibited unique characteristics, as would be expected in a high school classroom.

My case study was also descriptive and provided what Merriam (1998) referred to as a "thick" (p. 29) description of the students with whom I worked. Because I used an English language arts classroom, I asked questions about reading habits and related reading/literacy activities. Acknowledging the unpredictable nature of teenagers, I ensured that my questions would lead to interesting, diverse, and unexpected discussions. It was my plan to compile interesting and rich samples of narratives that would represent the feelings and experiences of the students who were involved in the study. Prior to commencing my research, I had developed some theories on what I would uncover—what truths these students would reveal about their early reading experiences. During my first classroom visit I found that the students either did not want to talk about or could not remember some of their experiences in the early grades. Consequently, it was necessary for me to revise and rethink my perceptions and rework the carefully scripted interview questions that I had created to gather as many "stories" as possible.

Finally, my study was heuristic because I hoped to be able to explain and clarify the reading histories and behaviors of the group of students. By using the voices of my participants, I have also attempted to illuminate some perceptions, gain some insights, and clarify some common misconceptions about teaching adolescents as well as provide some clear examples of instructional strategies that present opportunities for students to meet with success in interacting with text.

There is a perception that teenagers do not read, that they would much rather watch television or play on their computers. I did find that the computer is a very important part of the lives of my participants and that many of the students use the computer as a tool to garner information. Reading is also a part of their lives and several of the participants enjoy reading. Perhaps they are not reading what many teachers may want them to read, but all of the students understand the importance of reading and read for their own purpose.

Research Design

Initially, I asked the students in the class to complete a survey of their reading and viewing interests and backgrounds (Appendix D). Then, to gain more specific details of their reading interests and classroom experiences, I conducted a series of audiotaped interviews during class time in a conference room in the library with individual student volunteers and followed them with a short focus-group discussion with these same students. To gain insight into the classroom dynamics of this 10-2 Plus class, I spent several class periods observing classes, assuming what Gold (1958; as cited in Merriam, 2001) referred to as the "observer as participant" (p. 101) stance, the main objective of which was to record interactions that occurred or responses that arose when the lessons were being conducted.

The Personal Reading History Inventory (Appendix C) that I administered during the early part of the research has some relevant questions or discussion starters that I pursued in the later stages of research. The significant initial questions/prompts were as follows:

1. What memories do you have of childhood reading?
2. What are your favorite things to read?
3. What do you read when on the computer? When reading magazines? Newspapers?
4. Tell about a time when you felt successful in language arts class.
5. Tell about a time when you felt unsuccessful in language arts class.
6. Tell about the ELA 10-2 course.

7. Do you read outside of school? (NOT homework related) . . . If you do, what do you read?

Because the nature of a qualitative research project, as Ellis (personal communication, May 16, 2002) stated, is to "mine gold," I hoped that structuring the interviews in such an open-ended manner would yield a rich, descriptive view of the class and students.

Significance of the Study

This study implies that we, teachers, adults, students are all members of a literacy-based society in which basic reading skills are essential for all individuals. These individuals need to be able to read street signs, telephone directories, job-application forms, want ads, greeting cards, election ballots, and tax forms. Individuals also deserve the aesthetic benefits of reading.

As professionals, we owe it to our students to provide them with the best possible learning opportunities. I know that most teachers would agree with this motherhood statement, yet the reality is that best learning opportunities are *not* occurring in many of our classrooms. Goodlad (1984), Cuban (1993), and Myers (1996) discussed the fact that the traditional transmissionist view of education has not changed. Numerous factors keep the situation static, and changing the status quo would be a lengthy process.

I hoped that by focusing my study on a classroom that *does* provide alternate learning opportunities for students who have joined the reluctant/resistant reader ranks, I would begin to gain insight into the features, factors, conditions, and attitudes that characterize such classrooms. It was important that I clearly capture these variables in a way that would encourage other educators to take some risks and adopt some or any of the characteristics of this learning environment that I identify.

Reliability/Transferability/Validity

Merriam (2001) stated that "reliability refers to the extent to which research findings can be replicated" (p. 205). This can be difficult when dealing with the fluid behavior of individuals and the unique interactions between members of the study. In this study the participants had vastly different interests and behaviors, and they certainly were unique individuals. The only similarity between them was the fact that they were enrolled in the same school and taking the same class together. Therefore, to truly replicate the research, one would need to replicate the individuals and the setting.

Merriam (2001) stressed the importance of providing "rich, thick description so that readers will be able to determine how closely their situations match the research situation, and hence whether findings can be transferred" (p. 211). Teachers reading about Master K. or Hayley may find some similarities to students that they have taught. By giving descriptions that may remind teachers of similar behavior or traits in other students I hope to encourage transferability. Granted, every teaching situation is as unique as the environment and personalities, but there should be some indicators of resonance and recognition that strengthens the reliability of the research.

Merriam (2001) also reported that "internal validity deals with the question of how research findings match reality. How congruent are the finds with reality? Do the findings capture what is really there?" (p. 201). Merriam (2001) continued:

> According to my research experiences as well as the literature on qualitative research, an investigator can use six basic strategies to enhance internal validity:
> 1. Triangulation [which entails using multiple sources of data]
> 2. Member checks [taking data back to participants]

3. Long-term observation at the research site
4. Peer examination—asking colleagues to comment on the findings
5. Participatory or collaborative modes of research-involving participants in all phases of research
6. Researcher's biases—clarifying the researcher's assumptions, worldview and theoretical orientation at the outset of the study. (p. 205)

In this research, in an attempt to enhance validity, I used several of Merriam's (2001) strategies. I used a written inventory, taped interviews and classroom observations, and subsequent field notes as a means of triangulation. I used member checks with the students as I reviewed their first interview findings with them prior to conducting the second interview. I also shared the written inventories and the taped interviews with Mr. T. I did not share the final interviews with the students because the class was completed, and they were on semester break. I commenced the research in early September and completed my data collection in late January, which is a moderate amount of time spent at the research site. The fact that the course finished in January and the students all went on to other settings prevented any further observations.

I also did some limited peer examination by asking two other English teachers to comment on my findings. I did not involve the participants in any form of collaboration during the research.

In terms of addressing biases, I am a teacher of reading, and I found it difficult to remain objective in telling the "story'" that unfolded in this classroom. I attempted to bracket out my own biases, especially from an administrator's stance, in which I assume a "fix-it" approach, but when reading over the transcripts I realize that in some cases I was not that successful.

Peshkin (as cited in Eisner, 1998) remarked that

> if, somehow, all researchers were alike, we would all tell the same story (insofar as its non-denotable aspects are concerned) about the same phenomenon. By virtue of subjectivity, I tell the story I am moved to tell. Reserve my subjectivity and I do not become a value-free participant observer, merely an empty-headed one. (p. 48)

Peshkin continued:

> When I disclose what I have seen, my results invite other researchers to look where I did and see what I saw. My ideas are candidates for others to entertain, not necessarily as truth, let alone Truth, but as positions about the nature and meaning of a phenomenon that may fit their sensibility and shape their thinking about their own inquiries. (p. 48)

Over the course of a five-month semester I watched, listened to, and laughed with this community who were gathered together under the umbrella of the ELA 10-2 Plus program. These adolescents were such nebulous shape shifters, yet they told similar stories. I wove together my observations, the reflections of the participants, my own personal experience drawn from 25 years as an educator, and the broad, related professional reading that became part of this research. I must trust that what they said is accurate. I also believe that the findings and revelations are real and authentic for this group of participants, in this setting, at this time.

As with any investigation, unforeseen factors emerge, and I am aware that my presence in the classroom would have had an influence on the responses of the teacher and the students. All of the participants were aware of my personal background as a teacher and administrator within the district, but I cannot measure how much of an influence my position had on their responses.

Ethical Considerations

The Faculty of Education and Extension Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta approved this research, and I also received written approval from the relevant school district. The teacher, the participating students, and their parents voluntarily chose to be part of the study after I issued an invitation both verbally and in writing that also included an explanation of the purpose and nature of the research. I gave those who were interested in participating in the study, as well the parents of the students involved, an opportunity to ask questions prior to commencing the research. I also asked the teacher, students, and parents to sign a consent form that explained the nature of the study and their rights in relation to the study. I explained the study orally to the students and the teacher and answered questions or addressed concerns that arose. In my verbal explanation and the written consent forms I informed the participants that they could opt out of the research at any time without penalty.

I have used pseudonyms to refer to all participants and have taken care to protect their identification and that of their school in revealing the results of the study. Permission granting the use of data for presentations and written articles is part of the consent that the participants signed.

Role of the Researcher

Qualitative research makes a number of key assumptions about the role of the researcher. Merriam (1998) assumed that qualitative researchers are primarily concerned with the process that they undertake during the research rather than with the final outcome. Researchers view the process from a holistic viewpoint in which they consider all facets interrelated and important. Because of the nature of this form of research, it is important that the researcher remain flexible and open to changes and twists that may unexpectedly arise. In qualitative research the researcher is an active part of the observation and is therefore able to adjust and reshift the focus when situations or circumstances warrant it. In my particular project I was aware that, because I was working with adolescents, their emotional fluctuations and often unpredictable responses and actions might impact my results. It was necessary that I remain flexible, approachable, and nonthreatening to honestly and accurately capture their experiences from my limited viewpoint.

Merriam (2001) also discussed the fact that qualitative researchers are interested in meaning; more specifically, they are interested in examining how participants "make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world" (p. 6). The researcher searches for an understanding of the participants' perspectives. It is almost as though the qualitative researcher strives to get *inside* the situation and *see* the same things and in the same way that the participants see them. Merriam referred to this approach as "emic" (p. 6). Mertens (1998) stated that the researcher tries to "understand the culture from an *emic* (insider) and *etic* (outsider) perspective" (p. 165) and clarified *culture* as "the behavior, ideas, beliefs, and knowledge of a particular group of people" (p. 165).

By taking an emic stance, I attempted to enter the learning community of this group of high school students. I tried to capture a view of their unique "culture," all the while realizing how different we were. By posing questions about their early reading experiences, I relived my own personal experiences and was prompted to reflect on the early reading experiences of my own children. The experience also led me to reflect on my teaching experiences and how I had behaved and what attitudes I had exhibited when I taught young, budding readers. When the researcher becomes so close to the situation, it is difficult to remain objective; however, objectivity is not one of the major premises upon which qualitative research relies, and I believe that viewing the students' experiences through my own personal lenses was an important part of this research.

I found assuming the role of participant-observer particularly difficult. On the one hand, I needed to observe and listen to what the participants were saying. On the other hand, it has always been my nature to become engaged with students, and thus remaining objective, remaining in an observant stance, was challenging because I wanted to comment, help, facilitate, "fix." When I conducted the interviews, I had to consciously avoid prompting or leading the discussion. I bit my tongue often during the semester.

Boostrom (1994) encouraged researchers to learn to pay attention to what is occurring in the classroom. By using metaphors in which the observer assumes a variety of roles, including video camera, playgoer, evaluator, subjective inquirer, insider, and reflective interpreter, he emphasized the value of these almost chameleon qualities. These roles can be viewed as markers on a continuum on which the video recorder is in the most objective stance, almost an outsider looking into the situation. The reflective interpreter, at the other end of the scale, would be the closest and might sometimes become intimately engaged with the interactions that occur. During the semester, and certainly following the data gathering, I experienced the different roles—perhaps not in sequence, and occasionally they shifted rapidly; nevertheless, I believe that they were authentic experiences.

Changing perceptions and changing environments are to be expected in dealing with groups of adolescents. Emotional highs and lows were common, and I was fascinated by the classroom politics that occurred, particularly when students were absent and the dynamics and atmosphere were noticeably different.

Merriam (1998) stated that "the product of a qualitative study is richly descriptive" (p. 8). Often I use the participants' actual words to support the findings. One of the most powerful facets of a qualitative study occurs when the actual *voice* of the participants comes through in the final analysis. I hope that I have captured the experiences and perceptions of my target group of students. I have found that teenagers can be very astute and reflective, and I aimed to provide the opportunities for reflective practice to emerge.

Sandelowski (1993) commented:

> Researchers never enter any project tabula rasa but, rather, with the general perspectives of their discipline, with their own research interests and biographies; and with certain philosophic, theoretical, substantive and methodological orientations. (p. 215)

My understandings of the practices of at-risk, reluctant readers are filtered through my experiences as a Grade 9 English teacher and a principal of a K-9 school, which have undoubtedly factored into my discussions.

I was cautioned during my candidacy exam to remember that my role was that of a researcher, not an administrator, and I was very conscious of my stance the entire time that I was involved in the classroom or in the school. I was fortunate to have been granted a one-year sabbatical from my principalship and therefore removed from the administrative duties that are part of the job, so I was able to devote my time to the classroom. The sabbatical also distanced me from district politics and procedures, and it was easier to engage in conversations with staff and students when I was wearing jeans instead of a tailored suit.

When I first entered the classroom, the initial response from the students varied between guarded caution and a complete lack of interest. Several did not want to become involved in the research because it might mean extra work, and several others were not sure that they wanted to trust me. I could understand these reactions because many of these students had had past experiences with administrators, and most of those experiences were negative. I also felt that, initially, the classroom teacher was very conscious of my role as an administrator, even though we were both aware of the fact that I could not have any *direct* influence over him. Fortunately, this initial tension seemed to dissipate after several frank and cordial discussions.

As I began to visit the classroom on a regular basis, the students began to accept my being there and began to chat. Several were very interested in why I was doing the research and why I wanted to listen to what they had to say. They also expressed their disdain for the writing that I told them would be involved. "Too much work!" was the response from several of the boys.

As much as I tried to stay objective, I know that my personal biases and prejudices influenced my behavior in the classroom and during the interview sessions. I have always loved to read, and I had difficulty accepting the apathy that many of these students expressed when they discussed reading. I am also aware that my presence in the classroom had an impact on the teacher as well as the students. I tried to be as accepting and open as possible so that these students would not tell me only what they thought I wanted to hear. I hope that their responses were authentic and represent the perceptions and voices of the teacher and the students.

Data Collection and Timeline

Over the course of the five-month semester I visited the classroom 16 times and assumed the role of researcher/investigator, which Miller (as cited in Creswell, 1994) defined as the "primary data collection instrument" (p. 163). By using my memory, field notes, written reading inventory, tape-recorded interviews, and discussions with students and staff, I was able to gather data that represented the situation.

During my first visit in September I addressed the entire class to give them an overview and the planned format of my research. I also distributed the necessary permission forms in accordance with ethics requirements. I returned later that week to administer the Reading History Inventory (Appendix C) to all of the students who expressed an interest in joining the research and had garnered the requisite parental permission.

After administering the inventory, I made five visits during which I observed the interactions in the room during the structured lesson delivery as well as the time dedicated to group/individual work. I also used this time to get to know the students and the teacher and to allow them to get to know me. I felt that it was important that the students become accustomed to having me in the classroom before I engaged in the one-on-one interviews.

I administered the reading survey in the first week of September after having received ethics permission and began to conduct the one-on-one interviews during a two-week period in November 2003. All of the interviews took place during the class and I conducted the interviews in a quiet conference room in the library. I returned for two observations after the Christmas break before conducting the exit interviews in January 2004. Again the dynamics of the class had altered, and several students were no longer attending. One of my students had been ill, the weather conditions were challenging, and attendance was problematic, so I was forced to reschedule the exit interviews several times. I also attempted what turned out to be a dismal focus-group interview. Students were absent or simply disinterested, and I could not maintain their focus. Not wanting to assume a teacher role, I simply closed the discussion. I visited the classroom on the final day of classes and returned in February to gather the final exam results and debrief with the teacher. I also returned to collect further student progress reports in September 2005.

Selection of Participants

When I made my initial visit to the classroom, 18 students were enrolled in the program, and after 12 of the 16 who were present expressed interest in becoming involved, they completed the Reading History Inventory (Appendix C). When I returned in November to commence the interviews, the dynamics of the class had changed: Three students were no longer attending, and one new student had enrolled. Ten students who had initially expressed interest remained, and I had previously decided to limit my interviews to six students, so I divided the group by gender (because I wanted gender balance) and randomly drew six names. I used the data from the Reading Inventory as a starting point for the interviews and devised a set of questions—discussion starters (Appendix E).

I formally interviewed these six students—three males, three females—twice, once in November and again in January prior to the end of the semester. Besides the formal tape-recorded interviews, I took the opportunity to have a number of informal conversations within the class setting. I also made a number of classroom visits to observe the lesson and walked around to help/guide/talk to the students as they worked on projects. I planned to conduct a focus-group interview toward the end of the semester; however, attendance was sporadic, and by then the students' interest was diminishing.

When I finally did get several of the participants together, I could not generate any meaningful discussions, so I simply gave up the exercise .

My experiences as a teacher of language arts for over 20 years would not allow me simply to sit and observe students working, so I helped out where I could. In one lesson the students wrote poetry, and I engaged in a discussion about rhyming and word choice. Another afternoon the students were working on biographies, and I helped with the formatting. Once I joined the class for "movie afternoon" and listened to the discourse. Strong, Silver, and Perini (2001) stressed the importance of connecting with students, and I hoped that a casual and nonthreatening presence would allow the students to give answers that were truthful and confident in the exit interviews.

I used a specific set of questions to formally interview two teachers (Appendix F). I recorded both of these interviews and later analyzed them for themes. The classroom teacher and I had 20 or so discussions, and I observed his teaching and mannerisms over the course of the five-month semester. The other teacher whom I interviewed was instrumental in establishing the Plus program, had taught the 10-2 a number of times, and was currently teaching the follow-up ELA 20-2 Plus course. In addition to the formal tape-recorded interview, I visited her classroom 12 times when she was not teaching to discuss and gather information on the progress of the program. I made no formal observations because this was not the focus of my research.

Data Analysis

Merriam (1998) defined *data analysis* as follows:

> Data analysis is the process of making sense out of the data. And making sense out of data involves consolidating, reducing and interpreting what people have said and what the research has seen and read—it is the process of making meaning. (p. 178)

Creswell (1994) reminded me that "the process of data analysis is *eclectic*" (p. 153), that there is no prescription for analysis: "Data analysis requires that the researcher be comfortable with developing categories and making comparisons and contrasts. It also requires that the researcher be open to possibilities and see contrary or alternative explanations" (p. 153).

Organizing the data that I collected was a difficult task. I had nearly 200 pages of transcribed interviews and field notes. In addition, I had over 500 pages of notes that I took from the professional reading that was the foundation of the research. Patton (1980; as cited in Merriam, 1998) was correct in his statement that "the data generated by qualitative methods are voluminous; . . . sitting down to make sense out of pages of interviews and whole files of field notes can be overwhelming" (p. 153).

The actual act of distilling the data into categories of themes and patterns was challenging and will be discussed in a fuller context in chapter four. However, to summarize the process, I began by closely examining the Personal Reading Histories (Appendix C) and reviewing the field notes that I took during my classroom observations. The Personal Reading Histories did not provide a tremendous amount of data; nevertheless, I used the responses as a basis for the interview questions and referred to the students' written responses when I interviewed them. The field notes were important because I had written descriptors of the students and could almost put a face to the rather sparse reading histories.

The next round of analysis consisted of reading the transcribed interview responses. I looked for common themes and patterns and, following Mackey's (2002) advice, read and reread, "establishing potential categories and testing them against the material" (p. 28). I used colored Post-It notes to identify themes or categories and constantly checked back and forth for similarities. I used a coding system and assigned numbers to the responses and possible chapter inclusions. Of particular value was the time that I spent accessing other dissertations to see how other researchers had formatted and organized their work. This fluid, thoughtful process of analysis was very time consuming, and I needed a surprising amount of time for reflection and revision.

Conclusion

A case study provides the opportunity to gather a tremendous amount of firsthand, relevant data. The researcher, however, must be sensitive and responsive to the research participants so that they feel secure enough to freely share their perceptions and experiences. The researcher must also remember that he or she is a participant observer and must have patience when uncertainty and ambiguity arise. As stated earlier, qualitative studies may start with an initial premise, but they may twist and turn away from the starting point. Leedy and Ormrod (2001) described the research as cyclical by nature, "or, more exactly, helical" (p. 8) or shaped like a spiral; therefore the researcher must be willing to keep testing hypotheses and propositions and alter and shift viewpoints as themes emerge.

In this research I had to adapt my research because the Reading History Inventories (Appendix C) were so limited and the participants were so reticent when I asked them to discuss their own early reading process. The focus-group interview did not result in any relevant revelations or reflections either; instead, the students appeared weary and bored with the discussion and chose to go off on tangents that were irrelevant to the research. Having experienced this tactic before while teaching, I sensed their reluctance and simply closed the discussion.

However, the quality of the one-on-one interviews made up for the rather disappointing inventories and focus-group discussion. I was gratified by the attention and what I feel were genuine responses to my prompts. The students shared personal vignettes and experiences that were both insightful and touching.

The students' responses with regard to Mr. T. also resulted in a focus on and subsequent review of the professional literature on the topic of teacher-student relationships. It is important that qualitative researchers hone their detective skills to reveal all possibilities; this resulted in an extension to the literature review and an exploration of the dynamics within the classroom.

Merriam (1998) pointed out that good researchers must have good communication and listening skills. They must know when to listen, when to speak, and what to look for, yet stay removed enough to avoid losing the focus of the study. This was a difficult task for me, as I discovered when I reviewed the transcripts. Several times I had more to say than the student did, in particular when I tried to clarify or encourage a deeper, fuller response to a question. As a teacher I know the importance of wait time in posing a question; however, at times I found that I simply jumped in and did not allow necessary time for reflection. Also, after spending time analyzing the mounds of data, I became aware of a number of possible questions that I failed to pose or student responses that could have been expanded if I had been more alert. The interviews, though plagued with flaws, did allow me to gain a glimpse of the classroom and the lives of the students. Patton (1990; as cited in Merriam, 2001) correctly stated:

> We interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe. . . . We cannot observe feelings, thoughts, and intentions. We cannot observe behaviors that took place at some previous point in time. We cannot observe situations that preclude the presence of an observer. We cannot observe how people have organized the world and the meanings they attach to what goes on in the world. We have to ask people questions about those things. The purpose of interviewing, then, is to allow us to enter into the other person's perspective. (p. 72)

I trust that what the students said in the interviews was valid and as accurate and close to the truth as possible in this setting. Weber (1986) suggested that we should be "extending an invitation" (p. 65), inviting participants to share and guaranteeing that this act of sharing will be valued and respected. I hope that that was the case.

CHAPTER 4:

ANALYSIS OF THE DATA: TAKING THE THREADS APART

The Grade 10 students who were the focus of this research are unique individuals and collectively form a particular community of learners, yet they exhibit characteristics, feelings, and traits that transfer into other communities of learners. van Manen (1997) pointed out:

> Pedagogic situations are always unique; . . . what we need more of is theory not consisting of generalizations, which we then have difficulty applying to concrete and ever-changing circumstances, but theory of the unique; that is, theory eminently suitable to deal with this particular pedagogic situation, this school, that child, or this class of youngsters. (p. 155)

On the basis of their ages and the demographics of their environments, this group of six individuals have not escaped labeling or stereotypical descriptors; however, they are indeed unique, vibrant adolescents. When I analyzed the data, I became aware of the particular relevance of their situation.

Peshkin (as cited in Eisner, 1998) stated:

> When I disclose what I have seen, my results invite other researchers to look where I did and see what I saw. My ideas are candidates for others to entertain, not necessarily as truth, let alone Truth, but as positions about the nature and meaning of a phenomenon that may fit their sensibility and shape their thinking about their own inquiries. (p. 48)

Peshkin's belief is a basic premise of reflective research. What I discovered in working with this group is true for me, but not necessarily Truth in any absolute sense. I hope that others will take my findings and find commonalities or even opposite thoughts. Any discussion should lead to growth for all involved.

As I discussed in the previous chapter, case study allows the researcher to delineate and examine a situation that is bounded by time and place. I believe that this group of adolescents who were the focus of this research want to be treated in a fair and reasonable manner, and, most important, they want to be understood. Much has been written about the idiosyncrasies of teenagers, and this group conforms with the nebulous, shape-shifting perception of adolescents that is prevalent in society today.

Background Information

The Plus Program

The ELA-10 Plus program initially started with the support of AISI. It was teacher-driven and provided release time and opportunities for professional development. AISI funding also provided a computer, printer, and part-time teaching assistant for the classroom. The funding was discontinued after two years, but the success of the Plus program convinced the school administrators to continue supporting the program and the teaching assistant, although in what capacity I never discovered.

Initially when the Plus program was developed, it had a number of conditions or stipulations. The number of students enrolled was capped at 25, and classes were timetabled in the early-morning time slots in the hope that students rewarded by the positive experiences in the Plus classroom would feel encouraged to come to school and remain at school. The students were also given latitude in choosing the seating arrangement, were permitted to use Walkmans or IPods during seatwork, and handed in all of their work on a daily basis to enable the teacher (a) to stay current on student progress and give immediate feedback and (b) to eliminate the lost-assignment syndrome that plagued many of the at-risk learners in this classroom.

Flexibility was also necessary in working with this group of students, and the teacher encouraged compliance with due dates. However, the reality was that he accepted student work when it was completed, and in many cases he evaluated incomplete projects and gave marks for what the students handed in, often without penalizing them for what was missing.

The long-range plans for the program, as expected, reflect the outcomes for the Program of Studies (Alberta Learning, 2000) as the basis for planning. In the final chapter I will discuss to what extent those outcomes have been met.

Classroom Setup

My first visit occurred on the first Monday of September. I had been in Mr. T.'s classroom several times in the previous year to observe and consult with him, and I noted that the overall floor plan had not changed. Six rows of desks, with six desks in each row, all faced the front blackboard, which was surrounded on three sides by tackboard that had on it a selection of what appeared to be last year's student projects, including graphic tributes to *Macbeth* and *Lord of the Rings*. Because the semester had just commenced, this was not unusual; however, the work was slightly faded and past its prime. One part of the tackboard held a large copy of the bell schedules and a copy of the daily school news. There was also a cart filled with a variety of anthologies, dictionaries, novels, and thesauri. On the floor was a box labeled "Recycling" and a grey garbage bin.

On the left side of the room was another door and two individual carrels with chairs that were turned to face the wall. Also, against the far-left wall was an old, green armchair with a trapezoid table beside it. A narrow, four-foot high rectangular window was at the back of the room; it was open and framed by rather dated orange drapes. The back row of desks extended about two feet from the six-foot bulletin board that covered the back wall. Several posters extolling the virtues of nonsmoking were the only decoration on the back wall. When I had visited before, there had been some examples of student projects; however, during this visit I noticed that they were gone, and the bland bulletin board now faced the class.

A large brown bookcase had been placed about six feet away from the right wall and was used as a divider to provide storage for Mr. T.'s collection of books, binders, photos, mementos, and so on. The bookshelf faced the right wall, and the back of it was about three feet from the first row of desks. Mr. T. used the top of the bookcase to store the files and work for the students, and over the course of the semester I watched students store and retrieve projects from there.

Mr. T.'s desk was an old, brown, wooden desk with a vintage-style wooden swivel chair. On his desk was a scattering of texts and novels and a hardbound dictionary. He used the lid from a paper box for assignment storage, and his black binder of lesson plans, marks, and assignments was open on the top of his desk. A five-foot rectangular table that made an extension to his desk was covered with neat piles of handouts and paper supplies. There was also another window behind Mr. T.'s desk and another shorter bookcase that held a kettle, a selection of teas, instant coffee, soup mixes, and a small microwave. The lower shelves were full of novels, teaching materials, and so forth. Next to the bookcase was another small table with a computer and a student chair. A blackboard covered the entire wall, but only the section nearest the front door was used. Hooks that I later discovered were used to store Mr. T.'s teacher advisory identification tags were attached to the wooden rim around the blackboard, and the only notation on the blackboard was a list of reminders of assignment due dates, registration, football practice, and so on. A closet with four shelves that contained more anthologies, paper, and materials was protected by a sturdy wooden door; and a tall grey metal filing cabinet sat adjacent to the front door. Several ornaments and stickers decorated the institutional equipment. The floor, walls, and desks were the standard institutional beige, as were the uncovered bulletin boards.

I was sitting at the side of the classroom at the table that was joined to Mr. T.'s desk while I watched the students file in. This was my usual observation point, unless I was off interviewing or walking around the room listening and monitoring what the students were doing.

The bell for class change rang, and within a couple of minutes the first boy rushed into the classroom and ran over to claim the comfy armchair that was in the back left-hand corner. He slung his backpack on the floor and proceeded to yell across to several of the other classmates, apparently boasting "I got here first"—which meant, I assume, that he had claimed the coveted comfy chair. The two boys replied by shrugging their shoulders and sat down across from each other at the back of the two middle rows, also dropping their backpacks loudly onto the floor. Three girls entered, chatting enthusiastically as they found their seats staggered in separate rows at the front of the room, but close enough to continue their conversations. Another two girls entered together and sat down one behind the other, two desks from the front of the room in the second row. One of the girls, whom I later got to know as Jennai, turned to me and said "Hi." Another girl, who later chose Hayley as a pseudonym, entered the class alone, with her head down. She sat at the far left side in the front desk. She did not speak to anyone;

instead, she opened her backpack and took out what appeared to be a paperback novel. She immediately began reading. The rest of the students filtered in and moved towards the back, leaving her isolated in her own space. One boy entered just before the door was closed and sat right beside the boy in the armchair; another boy took a desk in that far row at the very back and sat on the top of the desk. He remained there for the entire class. At that time nine girls and eight boys were present. Mr. T. had informed me prior to the start of the class that registrations were still being finalized, so, depending on timetabling glitches, there might be some movement in and out of the classroom before the group was settled for the semester.

Mr. T. took the attendance first and asked whether anyone knew anything about the two students who were missing. A student responded that one of the missing boys had changed classes, and another girl told him that the missing girl had gone home sick. A student then took the attendance sheet to the main office.

Mr. T. introduced me, and I used the opportunity to tell the students who I was and what I was hoping to do when I returned to the class. I explained exactly what I hoped my research would accomplish and how I planned to conduct the research. There appeared to be polite interest in what I had to say, and when I opened the floor for questions, one boy, who later turned out to be Master K., asked me how long I had being going to university and seemed astounded when I responded "Over eight years." Another boy, the one who had claimed the armchair, wanted to know whether I would get more money for finishing the degree, and when I replied "Probably not," he wondered, "Why bother?" In his view I was already making "lots" as a principal. He looked around for support from his classmates, and many of the students nodded in agreement. The idea of lifelong learning did not appear to appeal to many of these students. Several other students wanted to know whether there would be any "work" involved, and I replied that I would be the only one doing any "work" after the interviews finished. They appeared satisfied, so I then asked who would be interested in participating in my research, and nearly all of the students indicated some form of interest by either a nod or a raised hand. Sensing that I had taken enough time away from Mr. T.'s lesson as well as feeling that I had saturated the topic, I handed out the permission letters for the students and their parents to sign. I told them that I would be back later on Thursday to collect the forms and administer the Reading Inventory. I returned to my table and quietly observed the rest of the lesson.

Mr. T. positioned himself at the side of the classroom behind a wooden lectern and began by asking the group what the topic of the previous lesson had been, to which there was no response. He then reminded them that they would be working on short stories and that several elements were common to short stories. As he was trying to elicit some response and focus the class, the boy in the armchair, whom I named "Armchair Boy," was having a one-way chat with the boy sitting beside him. Mr. T. pointedly asked Armchair Boy a question about the last class, hoping, I assumed, to draw him into the lesson, but the boy just shrugged his shoulders. Mr. T. asked one of the other students the same thing and received a tentative, almost questioning response: "Symbols?" "Great!" was Mr. T.'s response. Armchair Boy responded loudly, "All right!" and again glanced around, apparently looking for attention or approval. After the outburst, Armchair Boy put on his earphones and began listening to a Walkman. Mr. T. asked him to put the Walkman away, and the boy made several motions, but did not comply. During the entire

15-minute mini lesson, Mr. T. repeatedly asked Armchair Boy to put the Walkman away and finally walked over and removed the Walkman from him.

The discussion of symbols continued. Master K. stretched the focus to symbols or motifs in movies, and the class became animated in their descriptions of a variety of film techniques. Mr. T. guided the discussion back to short stories, and nearly every student contributed to the discussion, some putting up hands, others simply calling out. Mr. T. responded "Nice," "Okay," "Right." He finished the short lesson by stating, "Here's what you've shown me. . . . You know it." He then passed out a two-page handout that summarized symbols and required that the students read several paragraphs and locate examples of symbols. They were obviously encouraged to work together, and several immediately clustered their desks together. I observed the dynamics as Master K. and several of the girls sat together, and Armchair Boy and the boy next to him chatted, not even glancing at the handout. Jennai joined the two other girls at the front of the room and began to read the directions while the others followed along. Hayley, who was still isolated in her own space at the front of the room, pulled the novel that she had been reading out of her backpack again and began to read, ignoring the handout. One of the students, who later became known as Cyrus, was joined by two other girls, and they also appeared to get down to the task. Mr. T. circulated around the groups, assisting and focusing them on the handout. I also left my table and walked around, listening to the conversations, which appeared to be off task until I neared the students.

The seatwork continued, and Mr. T. returned to his desk. Using this as a cue, I sat down next to him, and he explained that he assigned seatwork that related to the mini lesson and allowed discussion and cooperative learning to occur. He conceded that "most of the time" students were on task, but he also felt that the discussions were important. He used this seatwork time to call upon individual students for one-on-one conferencing (although the school term was so new that the students had not really begun to write the short story, which was to be part of the first theme).

Either the seatwork did not fill the entire time or the students felt that they had sufficiently completed the work, so they began to pack up 10 or so minutes prior to class dismissal and resumed their chatting in groups. Mr. T. did not check for completion; instead, he announced that they would "review" the handout in the next class, so they were to "finish off at home." Even though I had been told that all work in the Plus classroom was kept in school, I watched as the students stuffed the two-page handout into their binders and backpacks.

After class Mr. T. and I discussed the students and the program itself. Because I would not be able to return the following day, I asked him what would happen next, and he told me that he would review the handout and continue working on the elements of the short story. His plans included the students' use of the classroom anthologies to read a selection of short stories as exemplars. He was very clear in stating that he would read out loud at first, then he would give the students an opportunity to read in groups. This would, he felt, prevent the dreaded "reading-out-loud phobia" that so many of these students had. Later, when I conducted the first set of student interviews, they certainly voiced this fear of reading in front of peers.

Mr. T. expressed his concern about Armchair Boy and his apparent lack of motivation and interest. Although I found Mr. T. to be very calm and easygoing with the students, his frustration with this student was obvious. I was not surprised when I returned in November and found that the boy had transferred out. It appeared that a disagreement had occurred between the school administration and the boy's mother, and she subsequently transferred him to another high school in the vicinity. Mr. T. offered no further elaboration, but I suspected that the boy's apparent lack of focus might have had something to do with the move.

Subsequent Visit

I returned to the classroom on Thursday afternoon to administer the reading inventory and pick up the permission forms. As expected, only five students had returned the forms, but several others promised to return the following day. On Monday I had left a copy of the inventory for Mr. T. to review, and he felt that administering the tool to the entire class would be valuable for him, so I distributed the inventory to all of the students. I did not use any data from the students who did not return their forms or did not wish to participate, although Mr. T. read their responses. I circulated and answered questions that arose. I had anticipated that the inventory would take about 15 to 20 minutes, but several students were very succinct and finished in 10 minutes. Some discussion arose as the students recollected favorite childhood books, and some students really struggled to remember titles or experiences. After 20 minutes I collected the inventories and planned to sort them later, and Mr. T. began to review a short story that the class had read previously.

Similar to the previous lesson, the students were somewhat reluctant to answer; however, Master K. cooperated and recalled several things that related to one of the stories. He appeared to spark the others, and considerable discussion occurred. One student called out "Oh yeah!" and appeared to be glad to be a part of the discussion.

Another student compared the plot in one of the short stories to the plot of a TV sitcom that she had watched the previous evening, and the discussion swung to the show and the actors, themes, and so forth. Subgroups began parallel discussions, and the room became very animated. Mr. T. let the discussion continue for a few minutes as all of the students—even Hayley—joined in. He then pulled the discussion back to the topic of short stories and the actual stories that the students had read in class. He reminded them that they would be working on writing their own short stories and that they could use the discussion as a springboard. He then asked them to take their stories out of their binders and begin to work individually or in groups, and he encouraged them to pay attention to the setting of the story. The majority of the students began to dig through backpacks for looseleaf paper, and only one or two appeared to have done any previous writing. The majority started with a blank sheet, and I observed that several, including Armchair Boy and Hayley and two or three others, did not write a letter. Hayley did not take out a pen.

Threading the Needle: Introducing the Participants

Observation of the large group preceded the selection and later in-depth interviewing of the six participants. I visited the classroom one more time for a short observation and chat with Mr. T., then returned in late November. Because of the short span of the semester, I immediately commenced interviewing using a tape recorder and a list of questions/prompts (Appendix G). I recorded the place and time of the interviews.

Each of the six students, as expected, has a different background and different school and life experiences. I will introduce each student using the same basic framework: family demographics and some relevant personal information. I will compare and contrast the students through their discussions of their personal in-school and out-of-school reading histories and their elaborations on positive, negative, and coping experiences with reading at school. I will also offer some insights into their personal likes and dislikes in relation to reading experiences and will include a section on computer usage. In the next chapter I will investigate further themes, including the students' reflections on their own learning styles, work habits, and the Plus program.

By using the voices of the participants, I hope to portray an image of the students. "The case study," according to Patton (1990; as cited in Merriam, 2001), "should take the reader into the case situation, a person's life, a group's life, or a program's life" (p. 238). It is my intent in this chapter to introduce readers to the participants' lives and allow them to experience some of the interactions and discussions that occurred in the research.

The students selected—in some cases after considerable deliberation—their own pseudonyms to maintain their confidentiality. I have taken their responses from the transcribed interviews and have omitted what I have determined to be irrelevant (the "ums, ahs you knows," etc.).

Master K

Master K. is a polite and engaging 16-year-old who lives with his mother and one older brother. His father lives in the United States, and Master K. recently lived with him and was home-schooled while there, although he was very vague about the duration of the visit and what kind of school work he had completed. He explained he had been home-schooled because

> my dad didn't want to put me in school there because the schools were bad. And the area that we were living in, the schools weren't very good. So he home-schooled me, and that was working out really great. But all I was doing was school, so I decided I wanted to come back.

Reflecting on his vagueness led me to suspect that he had missed a considerable amount of schooling even though he stated that he had been very successful. I also had the impression that he had been sent there because there had been some difficulties at home. His revelations about his work habits filled in a little more of the puzzle and are cited later in this chapter.

Master K. enjoys working with his hands and stated that his favorite course is "construction . . . because it's hands-on work and I have a creative mind, and when I put my mind to it, I can make anything that I want. And then that's what interests me." Master K.'s statement about his interests confirms Smith and Wilhelm's (2002) findings from their research with a group of teenaged boys. They found that the participants complained that reading took up too much time—time that they would rather spend fixing or making things. They often "rejected and resisted it [school literacy] in actual practice because it was not related to immediate interests and needs" (p. 94).

Master K. hoped to become a mechanic and own his own garage when he completed high school, and he *did* intend to finish high school. This also reinforces another point that Smith and Wilhelm (2002) made that their participants profoundly believed in the importance of school and recognized the importance of reading—but viewed it as "schoolish" (p. 94) and separated from immediate use and function.

Master K. has a rather worldly air about him. He wears trendy clothing, and his hair is always very stylish, conforming with the current trends. I also found him to be very astute, and he often sat and watched what was going on in the classroom. He confided in me that his girlfriend went to a neighboring school, and he liked to visit her during the lunch break. The Honda that he took so much pride in keeping running was essential for him to get back and forth between schools. During one particular lunch in late November, "somehow" an altercation had occurred at his girlfriend's school, and he was now banned from visiting at lunch. He was frank in his disclosure that he had been in some trouble with several boys at the other school, and he understood the reason for the school administration's behavior. He was also confident that the girlfriend would be all right despite the fact that he would not be able to visit her.

Cyrus

Cyrus is a shy, yet remarkably popular, 15-year-old who lives with his two parents and a younger sister who is 11. During my observations in class and in the hallways, I noted that Cyrus was often surrounded by attractive female peers, and Mr. T. also attested to his quiet, yet undeniable charm. Cyrus had attended French-immersion classes until Grade 4, when his parents transferred him into an English setting. He reported having had resource room assistance for all of his English education, and on his Reading History Inventory he stated that he had a "reading disability," although he did not elaborate on this when I interviewed him.

Cyrus is very interested in ancient civilizations, including Mexico and Egypt. Several times the interviews included references to Cyrus' trip to Mexico and the ruins that he had climbed. He used the computer to find information that interested him, and, as Tovani (2000) and Chambers (1969) suggested, he managed to read difficult pieces of text because he was motivated to do so.

Chambers' (1969) statements may be rather dated when he stated that "reluctant readers know what they like and they find it in the popular magazines" (p. 40) and "The magazines merely deepen their reluctance to read more solid work. But also the solid work available seems to have little common ground with what they know they like" (p. 40). His reference to magazines as sources of diversion and interest for reluctant readers in the late 1960s can be substituted with computer usage in the new millennium.

According to Prensky (2006):

> Our young people generally have a much better idea of what the future is bringing than we do. They're already busy adopting new systems for communicating (instant messaging), sharing (blogs), buying and selling (eBay), exchanging (Peer-to-peer technology), creating (Flash), meeting (3D worlds), collecting (downloads), coordinating (wikis), evaluating (reputation systems), searching (Google), analyzing (SETI), reporting (camera phones), programming (modding), socializing (chat rooms), and even learning (Web surfing). (p. 10)

Computers and new technology allow individuals such as Cyrus and Master K. to search for facts, data, and information, and often the material that they find is far more engaging than print texts or books. These forms of interactive media facilitate Cyrus's interest in different civilizations, and the subsequent discussion opportunities reveal an animated young man. The frown that was often present on his face disappeared during these sessions.

Constantine

Constantine is a bubbly, vivacious 16-year-old who lives with her mother and father and two younger sisters aged 14 and 12. An older stepbrother was killed in a car accident, and she has had a number of emotional highs and lows. Constantine's schooling, like Master K.'s, was interrupted in Grade 8 when she moved to the Caribbean with her family. She attended school there, but reported that everything was "so easy."

Constantine has experienced a number of academic disappointments and had had some difficulties with other subject teachers, but her clear, level-headed, and mature manner was refreshing. When I questioned her on whether she had received extra support in school, Constantine stated, "No, because they didn't code me as an ADD student and dyslexic until I was in Grade 4. And I didn't get Ritalin until I was in Grade 6."

Constantine's struggles with ADD confirm Cantwell and Baker's (1991) research findings that reveal that a tremendous number (80%) of students with AD/HD exhibit academic performance problems. Murphy, Barkley, and Bush (2002) also stated that ADD students have a higher history of grade retention (Constantine failed many of her Grade 10 subjects and was repeating English 10-2), placement in special education (she was then enrolled in the MAX program, which is designed to assist average and above-average students who do not succeed in the traditional school structure), and dropping out of school (during her Grade 10 year she simply "opted out" of attending school).

Constantine no longer takes Ritalin: "After a certain amount of years you kind of just do it yourself." This sums up her acceptance of her condition as well as her maturation.

Steve

Steve is a personable 16-year-old only child who moved from Montreal with his mother and father when he was eight years old. During the semester he had missed a considerable amount of school as a result of illness and fatigue that he felt was a result of his hockey involvement. Steve, like Master K, prefers to do things with his hands and is very involved in playing hockey. Sometimes he is out three or four evenings a week at practice and also fits games and tournaments into his busy schedule. Hockey scouts have been speaking to him, and he was hopeful that he would get the opportunity to play in the Western Hockey League and perhaps relocate to Portland or Vancouver the next year.

I questioned Steve about learning to read:

> I never really did learn how to read up to speed with my grade. . . . I lived in Montreal, . . . [and] they weren't really into reading or anything. Just, if you could speak French then you passed. And I just never learned. I moved out here and I was behind, and I was behind ever since.

Steve's behavior fits with Tovani's (2000) belief that "if they [students] are patient, the teacher will eventually feed them the information they need to know. Many resistive readers survive by listening to the teacher and copying the work of others" (p. 15). Steve, as I will discuss later in this chapter, simply "pretended" and stayed under the radar, so to speak.

Although Steve struggles with reading, he knows the value of completing high school but is hopeful that he will be able to use his hockey skills to advance himself.

Jennai

Jennai is a 15-year-old female who lives with her natural father, stepmother, and a 13-year-old stepsister. Her natural mother lives in Spain and has two other children. Jennai is extremely sociable, one-on-one as well as in a larger group, and it was challenging to maintain her focus when I conducted her interviews. She constantly jumped from topic to topic, similarly to her behavior in the classroom, where she moved from group to group chatting.

Jennai contended that she had no difficulty learning to read and that she reads constantly at home for her own enjoyment as well as to her younger sister. When I discussed her progress with the classroom teacher, however, he voiced a concern that she is not able to comprehend what she reads, and he questioned her claim that she reads so avidly. He stated that Jennai has had difficulty completing assignments and staying on task. Jennai's reading behavior may reflect Stanford's (2006) observation that

> many struggling readers conceive of the task of reading as calling words, not making meaning. Their entire focus is on pronouncing the words correctly, and they are satisfied that they have fulfilled their task if they get through the passage with all of the words pronounced. (p. 60)

Jennai has many interests outside of school and spends much of her free time with her younger stepsister. They are very involved in the African community, and both Jennai and her sister dance at gatherings. Jennai and her immediate family was planning to relocate to another city in February 2004, and she was both excited and nervous about the challenges of a new set of friends in a new school and city.

Hayley

Hayley, at 16, is the oldest of four children who live with both parents. She has a sister one year younger who attends another local high school, an 11-year-old brother, and 10-year-old sister. Hayley has a very diverse history and, like Constantine, was currently enrolled in the MAX program. She has a history of failure across content areas because she has difficulty completing and submitting assignments. Hayley has been tested by a psychologist and has a composite IQ of 135, has a remarkable vocabulary, is extremely creative, and yet is performing well below potential. Years of psychiatric interventions, therapy, and a variety of medications are part of her history.

Sousa (2003) listed the following characteristics of gifted underachievers, and Hayley certainly fits the profile: (a) a high IQ score—135; (b) a lack of effort—almost no work completed during class; (c) a skill deficit in at least one subject area—illegible and disorganized written work; (d) frequently unfinished work—only one assignment completed all term; (e) inattentiveness to current tasks—obvious during my classroom observations; (f) low self-esteem—revealed during the interviews; (g) poor work and study habits—loses notes, pens, binders, and handouts; introverted and isolated during instruction; (h) intense interest in one area—math; (i) seeming inability to concentrate—on medication for ADD and possibly a bipolar condition; and (j) failure to respond to usual motivating techniques—ineffective teacher use of a variety of motivators (p. 192). Hayley also fits the profile of the gifted underachiever who receives low grades but achieves high test scores. She is very aware that her failure to complete assignments is the reason for her poor academic record.

Early Reading

Master K. had difficulty in recalling learning to read because "when I was turning three I had brain surgery because there was too much blood pressure in my brain, so a blood vessel popped." He had very little recollection of any language arts experiences, books that he had read, lessons that teachers had taught, or even teachers who had taught him. He mentioned reading *Dirt Bike Runaway* in Grade 6 or 7 (he was unsure of the actual grade) and claimed, "That's the only book I've ever read." On his reading inventory, Master K. noted that his favorite book was *My Little Car*, which is not surprising, because he became very animated when I gave him the opportunity to discuss cars and mechanics. Reading with his brother was also a memory of childhood reading.

Cyrus had learned to read English in Grade 4, and it was "really hard, I guess. Well, I knew how to read French, I guess, pretty good. And so I always mixed up English and French." When I questioned him about the reading that he selected when he was learning to read, he responded, "Well, I read really easy, easy books. And I guess—I don't know—at the end of Grade 6, I only think I was at Grade 3 [level]."

Constantine reported that learning to read was a long journey, and

> I struggled a lot. It took me three months to say the word *the*. ["Why?"] I don't know; I have no clue. But I remember . . . I could say every other word but *the*.

> *The* was the most hardest word for me to learn. So I remember my teacher taped a big *the* on my desk, and that helped me learn *the*.

When I questioned Steve about his reading in class, he replied:

> I just pretended. I just opened the book, and I just pretended to read. I just couldn't do it. And I didn't want to say I couldn't do it because . . . I don't know; . . . I just didn't want to stick out or anything. . . . ["And no one noticed?"] No. Until, I think end of Grade 4. And that's when they started to feel I couldn't read or my stuttering—they thought I was making fun of kids because they stuttered and all that stuff.

Master K., Cyrus, Constantine, and Steve all reported that learning to read had been difficult, to the extent that Steve stated that he still cannot read. When I asked them to recall actual teaching or lessons, Constantine was the only one of the four who could remember specific activities (*the* taped to her desk). Even though Cyrus recollected his trip to Mexico and Steve remembered his drive across Canada, their actual classroom experiences were missing, and Master K. cited his operation for his failed memory.

The fact that these students had difficulty recalling actual lessons or activities does not imply that their memories were defective, because they had many other vibrant memories from their younger days. Instead, this amnesia could be a result of boring, futile, repetitive phonics lessons, which Wilhelm (1997) saw as "symptomatic of the way schools drain away the juicy joys of reading and set out obstacles between children and becoming literate" (p. 16). Not every individual is a voracious reader, and these young people all reported an interest in kinetic experiences. It should be remembered that not every competent reader who has had positive learn-to-read experiences is adept at recalling situations or lessons either. Perhaps time erases memories that are not important.

However, all four students admitted that they read slowly, which makes it certain that they lack the necessary component of fluency. Shaywitz and Shaywitz (2004) explained that fluency, or "rapid automatic reading that does not require attention or effort" (p. 9), is essential for individuals to become skilful readers and that "a student who is not fluent will probably avoid reading" (p. 9). That is certainly the case for Master K. and Steve, whereas Cyrus enjoys listening to books such as the *Narnia* series and *Lord of the Rings.*

Constantine, despite her difficulties, reads for interest, and Anne Rice and other contemporary writers are her favorites. Constantine's response could be a result of gender, as Rich (2000; as cited in King and Gurian, 2006) argued that the earlier frontal lobe development in females can "lead to girls being less impulsive than boys are. Girls are usually better able to sit still and read, able to read and write earlier, and better at literacy in general" (p. 59).

Boys generally are more physical and prefer hands-on activities, as is apparent in Steve's and Master K.'s responses, whereas girls are generally more passive and lean towards more individual, quieter activities that include reading and often writing in journals and diaries. Constantine is not alone in enjoying reading; both Hayley and Jennai also reported enjoying reading and could supply a list of favorite authors or titles.

Physical differences might be a factor, but Pirie (2002) also contended that

> for many boys, this is what intimidates them about English: there seems to be a secret code shared between authors, teachers, and some students, especially the girls. These insiders all understand the code and can produce and interpret things with 'deep,' 'sensitive,' or 'hidden' meanings that leave the boys outside, feeling stupid. (p. 52)

Jennai maintained that learning to read was "easy": "Actually, I started reading when I was in ECS. My dad bought me those Grade 1 books, and we started reading from it." However, she added, "Sometimes, if I don't like what I'm reading, I kind of tend to zone out, and I just don't pay attention to what I'm doing." As with Master K. and Steve, interest is a motivator for Jennai as well.

Hayley reported:

> I learned to read in Grade 3; actually, I think it was halfway through Grade 2. Grade 3 I was still having trouble. Grade 4 I was reading young teenager books. And in Grade 5 I was halfway done *The Lord of the Rings*. Beginning of Grade 5 I lost the book, so I couldn't finish it.

When I asked her to describe the actual process of learning to read, she said:

> Well, . . . to start off with, it was laboring over the words, putting them together. I knew what the words were, . . . but they made no sense. I knew what they meant, but it was just words on paper, and that's it. . . . And my dad's like, "Think of it like a movie, but a movie on paper." I'm like, "What?" "It's a book with pictures, . . . but you have to make the pictures yourself." "'Oh!" And I went back and reread the book and never got enough of it since.

Hayley is probably the only one of the six students who enters into what Rosenblatt (1982) called the *aesthetic stance*. When I observed her in class, she would often be engrossed in her novel and oblivious to her surroundings, almost what Nell (1988) referred to as the *ludic* state. The other students used a more efferent stance, taking what they needed from whatever piece of text they were using. For Master K. it was information on car parts; for Cyrus, geographical description of Egypt; for Steve, the latest hockey statistics; for Jennai, information on a medical procedure; and for Constantine, legends about unicorns. Their interests are certainly varied, yet they all have a personal purpose for reading.

Cyrus, Constantine, and Steve all mentioned Grade 4 in the interviews, and Kropp (1993) noted that Grade 4 appears to be a watershed year in the lives of young readers. Time devoted to reading in school diminishes, yet the content of the materials and the related vocabulary become more difficult. Many students have not yet mastered reading independently, but they are forced to do so as the pressures of content coverage emerge. A reading speed of 70 words per minute is considered necessary; otherwise, comprehension suffers, and students in Grade 4 who have not reached that level may get frustrated and give up. As I stated earlier, several of the participants admitted to reading slowly.

Kropp (1993) also suggested that reading in school turns into language arts instruction, and Krashen (1993), Allington (2001), and Kropp, among others, bemoaned the lack of time devoted to reading per se. Larson (2001) also discussed the drop-off in Grade 4 when "learning to read becomes detached from reading to learn" (p. 95). Students may not transfer the reading strategies into comprehension skills; thus they do not understand the role of engagement in reading. They have not mastered the battery of skills that they need to be efficient and successful readers, and once they enter the upper elementary track, they may fall further and further behind because less time is devoted to reading instruction per se.

Later Reading

Master K. stated in his Reading Inventory that he does not read in school or at home; instead, he watches television, spends "too much" time on the computer, and drives his car during his free time. This revelation meshes with the findings of Smith and

Wilhelm (2002) in their study of young men's literacy that led to the publication of *Reading Don't Fix No Chevys.* They found that the majority of their participants did not greet in-school reading tasks with enthusiasm, yet when they were given reading material that ignited their personal interests, the young men were indeed engaged, as is revealed in Master K.'s fondness for using the computer to research cars.

To cope with completing course assignments, Cyrus would "read until I'd get too far behind, and then I'd just go find a book on tape." It is obvious that Cyrus's lack of fluency impedes his progress. He has, however, developed a set of skills to help him to cope, and his reliance on audio reveals a self-awareness that will be valuable to him in later life.

When I asked Steve about his current reading, he stated that he did not consider himself a good reader; in fact, "I read [at] Grade 3 or 4 [level] the last time when we checked." Steve recollected a favorite reading experience:

> There was one thing that I had to read in front of the class, and I hate to read in front of the class. But me and my mom, we read over it like a lot, and I actually read it well. And it just made me feel good because I never read in front of the class or read well—fluently—before.

This experience occurred in Grade 9. Steve continued:

> Probably all through until Grade 8 I just never liked it [reading]. Still don't. . . . We had to do a lot of reading and book reports and all that. I just couldn't do them. I don't know; I wasn't up to it. And if I was, I wouldn't get too far. I'd try to read, and it just would discourage me that I couldn't do it.

Often he would simply quit, which reveals what Zirinsky and Rau (2001) identified as the most frequent reading strategy: "abandoning the book" (p. 8).

When I pressed Steve to recall some (or any) positive reading experiences, he replied, "Sometimes I read at home and I actually read okay, and that kind of makes me feel good that I know that I can read."

It is not surprising, according to Smith and Wilhelm (2002), that many teenage boys are considered "nonreaders" because reading takes up too much of their time and they want immediate results. Steve was very aware of the importance of practice in honing his hockey skills and attested to spending hours on the ice each week practicing, but he did not see the importance of reading to improve his reading skills. He simply "turns off": "I wasn't up to it!"

Master K. has a similar attitude, and the fact that using the Internet gives him immediate results when he searches for information encourages him to believe that instant information is the only thing of value for him. He does not have the patience to sit down and read; he wants the information now! Cyrus struggles because his rate of reading is so slow, and the information that he requires may be very difficult to garner using text on a page; however, he appears to be able to navigate through the print found in search engines. Perhaps the terse, functional formatting that is prevalent on the Internet lends itself to Cyrus's reading practices. The amount of text on a page in a book may be overwhelming to him, whereas the computer "page" may be somewhat shorter, more colorful, and easier to command.

In an extension of Smith and Wilhelm's (2002) work, Zirinsky and Rau (2001) argued that there are not masses of nonreading teenagers; instead, they contended that teenagers simply do not like to read in the ways that teachers expect. This process is usually solitary and analytical, which counters the social nature of teenagers. It is also counter to the way that adults read. When I read a novel or a magazine article, I do not have to write a summary or synopsis of it; yet Krashen (1993) asserted that too often, assuming our teaching hats, we expect that kind of analysis after reading.

Hayley used the word *frustrating* to describe her experiences during language arts class:

> Well, I don't know why I'm like this, but when I can't do something, I just get frustrated, and I should be able to do this. Or even, I can do this, but it's too hard; it should be easier. I've been doing this kind of thing for so long it should be coming a bit easier at least. But it doesn't. They say practice makes perfect; well, I've been practicing for a certain number of years here, and I'm not getting any better. My writing is the same as it was in Grade 3; maybe a little tiny bit better. . . . I'm starting to figure out how to spell, finally. . . . Well, when I was in Grade 3, I think it stopped going up slowly. And it's been Grade 3 for a long time.

Hayley knew what is required to be a good reader, and she is proficient at it (she reported that she reads at a Grade 12–plus level); however, when she is expected to produce written work, she experiences difficulty with what Pirie (2002) referred to as "voodoo pedagogy" (p. 52). He cautioned that

> if we leave those processes of reading and writing cloaked in mystery, telling ourselves that it all either comes naturally or else it doesn't we surrender to voodoo pedagogy. In voodoo, privileged people, objects, and rituals are invested with secret magical power, and to some of our students it certainly seems that there must be mysterious, unnamed powers needed to do well in English (p. 52).

Furthermore,

> To let students in on the secret of what happens when we read and write, we must take processes that are often left unspoken and make them explicit. Doing that gives power to the person who learns the secret—the power to do things with texts (p. 52).

All of the participants relayed different experiences of reading; however, the majority have certainly been influenced by interest. They choose materials that are motivating and fill a need, and their impatience with the slowness of the actual reading process is apparent. This is a generation that is used to fast cars, fast food, and fast communication, so it is not surprising that they find slowing down difficult.

Coping Strategies

Cyrus had resource room assistance until Grade 9, when the delivery of support services changed in accordance with a district reorganization. During Grade 9 there was limited support in that "if we had tests, we'd go in there and they would read it to us. Then for reading novels they would read it to us in the end." He recalled that "Grade 9, I just got lost a little bit, and I'd always go to my friends and get their notes. The teacher was pretty nice about giving us notes." Cyrus stated on the Reading History Inventory at the beginning of the term that he had a "reading disability."

Tovani (2000) reported that many students have been defeated by test scores, letter grades, and special groupings by the time they reach Grade 9. Struggling readers are embarrassed by the labels attached to their class placement and often perceive reading as something that they cannot do. As a way of defusing negative labels, Madame M. explained that the group of teachers who were responsible for creating this extra-help class consciously selected the title *Plus* to make it appear desirable rather than remedial. I am not sure that this really was the perception, because this group of students was fairly astute and well aware that this class was different from others. Several of the group felt that they did not need the extra support.

Steve described his way of coping as simply giving up, and Cyrus received help from others. Both boys acknowledged the assistance that their mothers, teachers, and peers had offered.

Tovani (2000) and Beers (2003) explained that many students do not expect to understand what they are reading and accept this confusion. Sometimes they even believe that it is too late for them to learn to read, as Steve stated, and face a lifetime of frustration and avoidance of reading. This is tragic because, as Tovani cautioned, "It is one thing to quit a chapter and fail a test, but to quit on a job application, a lease, a tax return" (p. 78) is another issue.

Pirie (2002) stressed that

> English is important for our students as *people*. Boys who don't buy in to the values of the subject are, we fear, losing something that matters more than career opportunities. They're cutting themselves off from ways of thinking and feeling that are important in their humanity. The young men and women in our classrooms will be making the future, and we want them to be good spouses, parents, leaders and visionaries. (p. 7)

All of the students had found some way of coping that varied from simply giving up (Steve's solution) to finding help (Cyrus's tactic). Hayley simply avoids tasks that she does not want to complete, as does Jennai, who prefers to talk her way out. Constantine and Master K. appear to float along, and both make an effort to complete their work. They are six diverse students who utilize a variety of coping mannerisms to get them through school.

Personal Likes

Cyrus reported that he likes math, and "I like to write—write stories. I write them, but then I can't read them. ["Why not?"] Spelling." His spelling is so poor that he has difficulty understanding what he has written—certainly a major drawback in a school environment where legible, decipherable text is valued.

In his spare time out of school Cyrus likes to swim and was currently working towards gaining his certification as a lifeguard. When I asked him about reading and comprehending the printed materials that might be required as part of the training, he did not think that it was an issue: "If I do [have to read], I can read. . . . If I don't get it, my mom will read it."

Constantine likes art and spends a great deal of time drawing when she is not at school. She wanted to become a poet when she finishes school, and at the time of the interview, she had just entered a poetry contest. She is also interested in animals—horses in particular—and prefers "something to do with helping other people." Besides poetry, Constantine also enjoys Shakespeare because "I like the way they use the words; I like how they say it. They make the words speak in a whole new dimension. It's like you [get] into another world. It's just different."

Steve considered math his best subject at school and prefers "an activity with my hands or just anything to do with my hands or sports or whatever. That's all I can do, is sports." Steve is very involved in hockey, and practices and games take up five nights a week. He stated, "I love the sport," but he would also like to read because not being able to read "gets in the way so much with hockey because they ask me to read this and sign all this stuff. I just can't do it. I don't understand half of it." This statement again confirms that Steve takes an apparent efferent stance in that he views reading as necessary only when he wants to acquire something.

Science and art are Jennai's favorite subjects because "that's hands on." She also enjoyed "acting for a Shakespeare play in Grade 9. I like hands-on experiences. They're easier, and they're more fun." Math is Hayley's favorite subject at school, and she was not taking art because "that's something I can do at home." She was taking two math courses this term and reported that the only homework that she completes is math. Hayley is a very strong math student and is able to complete complex computations without the use of paper and pencil (which she avoids).

It is not surprising that this group would have such diverse, yet similar interests. They value hands-on activities, which leads to a question about the activities and strategies used in teaching English. Paper-and-pencil tasks dominate many of our traditional classrooms, and this is an area that needs further discussion.

Dislikes

Cyrus described situations that make him uncomfortable: "Well, I don't like reading in front of people. I don't stutter at all except for when I'm really, really nervous. And reading in front of a class, I always start stuttering and I can't get the words." Steve, Constantine, and Master K. also reported that they hate reading in front of people, and their feelings mesh with Maxwell and Meiser's (2001) and Beers' (2003b) premise that peer approval becomes extremely important at the same time that reading problems become more evident. It is then that students find themselves more and more reluctant to take risks by reading in front of peers. Students will simply shut down or retreat rather than appear stupid. Beers observed that

> as students move through the grades, they come to value their peers more and more. Fitting in, finding a group, and forming relationships with peers become more valuable than stickers on homework papers or nods of approval from the teacher. If that need for peer approval begins to escalate (as early as third grade for some students) at the same time that reading problems become more evident, then students find themselves more and more reluctant to take risks in reading in front of their peers. At the very moment we need them telling us, "I got lost at this part," or asking, "How do you say this word?" or demanding, "How do you know that's what the characters looks like?" they begin to retreat behind a wall of silence, stares, and sullen behavior. "They won't try," we say. Instead, we fail to

> see that they are trying—they are just trying at what matters the most: keeping some form of respect with their peers. (p. 259)

It is not just the peer factor that should cause the removal of "round robin" reading in many classrooms. Stanford (2006) stated that

> the most pernicious culprit in developing the habit of word-calling rather than reading for meaning is round-robin bad reading. Good oral reading can be helpful for students with reading difficulty, but most oral reading I hear in schools is of atrocious quality, providing horrible models of reading. Children in lower tracks may spend most of the day sitting while someone mumbles through a textbook, making the meaning less, rather than more, clear. Oral reading has many valuable functions in a literature class, but students should never hear models of bad reading. (p. 61)

Eventually, students will reach a point where the effort that they must exert to find even minimal success with reading is not worth the embarrassment that they face in the process. Curwin and Mendler (1999) commented that students misbehave when they feel threatened or anxious, and yet many teachers corner students by asking them to complete tasks that make them feel uncomfortable. A fuller discussion of the value of and the need to create risk-free learning environments will occur in chapter 5.

Constantine complained about the requisite achievement testing when I asked her about negative reading experiences:

> I don't like reading comprehension, I really don't like reading comprehension, and mainly the fact that when I read something, I don't understand completely what I'm trying to comprehend, like in the middle of a test, . . . the big final tests that you have in Grade 6, Grade 9. I don't get those, and I didn't like that. I asked for mine in Grade 9 to be on a tape, a cassette, so I could actually understand it. . . . ["Did you?"] Most of it. The words still—they don't change the words at all.

The discussion continues on the value of having the exam read, and Constantine agreed that it could be an asset: "Oh, yes, instead of trying to read it, comprehend, and write."

She complained that a multiple-choice exam can be confusing because of the different experiences that the reader brings to the exercise:

> And the ones with pictures on it and you have to describe what's happening in the picture, so you can't really have a wrong answer to it, but I guess you do. ["Well, there's a best answer."] Yes. But see, in some kids' eyes, some kid playing on a swing set could be dangerous or a fear, in my and your eyes it's just having fun. Even a kid: . . . Maybe a kid has a trauma, an accident on one, on a slide or a playground or something. You see a whole bunch of kids playing on a playground, and the kid could be like, "That's the most dangerous thing ever."

Constantine's rather astute observation reiterates the importance of clarifying background knowledge before expecting accurate comprehension. The reader brings a variety of experiences, and Birkerts (1994) pointed out that as mature readers we "draw upon years of observation to help make pictures" (p. 97) when we read. Constantine does not have the same life observations from which to draw. She becomes frustrated when she cannot get the "right" answer on multiple-choice exams, and to a certain extent she blames herself. Yet a number of factors may contribute, such as a lack of cognitive ability or a lack of strategies to assist with comprehension. According to Probst (2003):

> Comprehension requires not just *seeing* the text; it requires seeing *through* the text to something that lies beyond it. It's hard to tell how well someone else is doing that. . . . Comprehension is too complex to be effectively assessed with anything so simple and reductive as a test, and it isn't achieved by concentrating solely on the text itself, though of course that does require close attention. Instead, to comprehend requires a concerted effort to see through the text to what lies beyond. . . . And that demands an imaginative and committed reader. I've come to believe that, except with the simplest texts, comprehension isn't something achieved, but is instead, like Ulysses' Ithaca, a goal to keep working toward. To comprehend *this* text, I have to also read *that* one; to understand either, I have to bring them to bear upon the world to which they refer, and that world to bear upon them, to know what they might mean, I have to imagine possibilities that their writers haven't considered. (pp. 56-57)

After reflecting on Probst's discussion, I am not surprised that Constantine has difficulty with reading comprehension. She may not have the skills to be able to "see through the text" or the interest because she has struggled with texts for years.

Yet another factor that might hamper Constantine's (and many other students') full engagement with text could be what Mackey (1993) described as the practice of teachers who allow students to believe that there is only one truth and that the teacher is the holder of the key to that truth. In reality we know, according to Mackey, that "good readers make mistakes, overlook important points, forget others, work out compensatory strategies so that they can read as *if* they had noticed it in the first place" (p. 162). Constantine and the other students have not had many opportunities to view teachers as fallible and prone to errors, and I believe that this is a key reason that students struggle. They need to observe the strategies that efficient readers use to demystify the act of reading and to avoid Pirie's (2002) "voodoo pedagogy" (p. 52).

Hayley does not appear to struggle with comprehension, but she dislikes essay writing: "I've got essays running through my head all day, all night. That and stories and poems and all sorts of—I could be a writer for a living if I could get the words on paper." When I asked her about the option of using a tape recorder, she replied "I have one, on a book here [points to her head], but when I try to get them out I stutter, and it is very annoying for me to go back." Hayley has a good sense of what constitutes a story because she reads so much; however, her frustration comes from not being able to follow through and write down her thoughts in a concrete manner. Her handwriting is nearly illegible, yet she has created some very interesting and realistic drawings. The school district supplies her with a laptop computer, but she is still very reluctant to compose written responses. Her frustration may stem from her inability to organize her thoughts. She is extremely scattered, which she acknowledged, and she blamed her ADD for many of her difficulties, all the while discussing how she could improve—a challenge to say the least.

Computer Use

Beers (2003) and Street (1997) are just two researchers who emphasized the importance of recognizing the concept of multiliteracies and the impact of this form of technology on society, particularly our youth. With the exception of Steve, everyone in the group of participants has access to computers at home and uses the tool for a variety of reasons. Even Steve reported using his cousin's computer to find information on several hockey players, which he later turned into a project for class.

Constantine revealed that she spends an average of two hours per day on the computer engaged in conversations with her friends via MSN: "It's like being on the telephone, but you can talk to eight different people at the same time." She also uses the computer to look up "tattoos and stuff."

Cyrus uses Google to find information on Egypt and ancient Mexico. He saves some of it and rereads it occasionally if he has nothing else to do. He also reported that he uses the computer to chat with friends and play interactive games. He rarely reads the rules prior to playing; instead, he just "wings it" and figures out where the "cheats" are so that he can win at the game.

Master K. also considers the computer a tool for gathering information on topics that interest him. He considers the computer "like my second life." He finds "stuff about cars on the Net" and chats about or with girls via MSN. He also plays complicated games on the computer without reading the accompanying instructions:

> I just learned. I taught myself and I taught my brother just by playing it. I started on it. Just started playing single player, and then I went onto the Internet and I started playing other people with these little mini games. And then I went into these new league games where you fight actually to get wins for your record.

Both Master K. and Cyrus acknowledged that they enjoy experimenting and playing when they learn new things. Even though learning a computer game or manipulating a search can result in errors, even the mistakes can be fun, unlike many classroom learning situations that may result in failure. I am sure that many of our students do not consider lengthy multiple-choice exams "fun." Feinstein's (2004) discussion of the teenage brain reveals that teenagers do indeed enjoy novelty and learn faster when they are allowed to manipulate their environment.

Jennai stated that she uses "every chance I get" to use the computer. She laughingly reported, "My friends ask me if I ever sleep [because] . . . I'm always on." Like Master K., Constantine, and Cyrus, she also uses the computer as a means of keeping in touch with her friends. In fact, Jennai told me that she now uses MSN instead of the phone to talk to friends. She also uses MSN.com because "there's always something about some celebrity or something." In addition, "I go to Yahoo and Google, and then I look up maybe on some kind of animals and medical procedures."

Hayley considers herself a "hermit" because she retreats to her room and uses her computer. At one point her parents took away her computer access in the hope that her school work would improve (i.e., that she would hand in some assignments), but that strategy did not work, and she now has her computer back. Of the six participants, Hayley is by far the most creative computer user:

> I read books. I find I read too [many] books too fast to find it worth buying them and reading them. Reading on the computer is a lot easier because when I'm done, then I don't got it left anywhere. It's not sitting around taking up space.

She discussed her need for a faster computer with more memory

> because of the pictures, because on some of the sites that I go to, I read stories about stuff; and also when I find nice pictures that go with the story or go with the characters. When it's got two stories—like two TV shows in it or two books in it—I go, "What's this person like?" And then I go off and find information on that character, . . . because with books you can't do that. If they don't give description enough—with things from TV shows, you can go and look up the name and their pictures from the actual TV show.

Hayley also uses MSN to chat with her friends, and one friend in particular has written a series of stories that could possibly be linked into a novel with chapters that extend at least 12 pages long or more. She has reread the work several times and thought that it should be published.

Like her friend, Hayley also uses the computer to write, but she has difficulty in completing projects:

> I write. I do write when I'm angry; I write stuff down. Normally my stuff is little tidbits—stuff that would maybe be in the middle or near the beginning of a chapter of, say, chapter five of a sixteen-chapter story. I never put the rest of the story out, but I write, say, chapter five and that's it.

Hagood et al. (2002) suggested that adults appear to dismiss the multimodal technologies as "general signs of the times" (p. 76) and computer usage as supplemental to our lives, whereas adolescents "seem to live in the moment engaged in the literacies they enjoy" (p. 76).

Luke (2002) stated that children as well as teenagers and adults are spending as much time, and in some cases even more time, online as they are watching television. My findings concur with this. With the exception of Steve, all of the group reported spending more time using the computer than watching television. Movie watching is popular with

Cyrus and Hayley because it is a family tradition, but they definitely prefer to use the computer.

The interviews revealed that, unlike many adults—including myself—who use the computer as a tool, these students view the computer as an essential part of their lives. Their use of the computer fits with Rosenblatt's (1982) aesthetic stance, whereas my own usage is more in the efferent zone. These students are all very proficient in communicating with peers via MSN and have a remarkable repertoire of sites and "zines," and at times I felt that they were speaking another language when they explained how to download iTunes.

Commentary

The Reading History Inventory and initial interviews allowed me to begin to explore the complex lives of these six students. When I looked for patterns, I found that both Cyrus and Steve had begun their reading instruction in a second language, French, which is not spoken at home. Both boys transferred to English settings in upper elementary school and consequently may have missed out on some fundamental reading instruction that takes place in division 1. This transfer, combined with what researchers have referred to as the *Grade 4 slump*, may have compounded their difficulties.

Another commonality that I noticed was that several of the students had moved geographic locations. Steve had moved from Montreal to the west, Master K. had moved to the US and back to Canada, and Constantine had moved to the Caribbean for a year. These students may not have been able to handle the changes and disruptions that occurred in their lives as a result of moving from one school system to another .

Disruptions in routines and procedures can be damaging for students who are experiencing difficulty in school.

Physical issues were also apparent in these students' reflections. Master K. had major trauma with neurological problems in early childhood and has had real difficulty recollecting experiences during his early years at school. Hayley and Constantine were aware that medications are integral to their lives, and Cyrus acknowledged that he is reading disabled.

All of the students had diverse out-of-school interests, mostly hands-on, physical activities. The traditional paper-pen tasks that predominate in most Canadian classrooms do not mesh with the tactile, experiential preferences of these students. All except Steve had easy access to home computers and used them for a variety of tasks.

Summary

This research centers on the unique reading experiences of this group of participants in the ELA 10-2 Plus program. This chapter introduces the students and offers some insights, both personal and academic. I have also used the opportunity to begin to answer one of the questions that guides the research: In what ways might an exploration and observation of students' reading experiences in an ELA 10-2 Plus program offer new insights into adolescent reading patterns and interactions with text?

Contrary to the mantra that teenagers do not read, the interviews that I conducted with the six students revealed that the majority of the participants do in fact read, although this brings to mind Zirinsky and Rau's (2001) findings that high school students read, but only what they want to, and "they don't like to read in the ways we ask them to read, using processes that are grim and tedious and solitary" (p. 112). In a similar vein Aronson (2001) simply stated that

> a second's thought will show that teenagers, especially boys, read a great deal. How could they install new programs, pass driving tests, select precisely the right clothing and look, know about their favorite teams, stars, musicians, and even writers if they weren't constantly reading? (p. 101)

All of the participants in this research acknowledged (to some degree) that they do indeed participate in some form of reading experiences, whether it is, as in Master K.'s case, a search for the perfect fuel pump or in Constantine's case, the scoop on the newest Tim Burton movie. The popularity of the new technology that promotes or encourages multiple or social literacies is apparent with these students.

Street (1997) emphasized that "the academic and schooled literacy of dominant western elites represents only one form of literacy amongst many" (p. 135), and this group of young people confirmed that written texts and novels are not their preferred medium; the majority are actively involved in technology. The importance of computer use in a variety of manners, whether simply as a lifeline between friends that has superseded the telephone or as a means of gathering information of interest or value, is notable. Perhaps the attraction stems from the fact that the user is in control and can determine the path to be traveled, unlike with many paper texts. Whatever the reason, the choice was overwhelmingly obvious.

The tremendous influence of technology on this group of students was surprising. Mackey (2002) explained:

> The historical situation of literacy as it manifests itself today involves an ecology in which print on paper is not the only route to making sense of texts, and in which not every reader has equal access to new media and technologies. (p. 6)

This group of individuals are fortunate to be able to utilize technology and have certainly adapted to and adopted a lifestyle that includes multimedia. Hayley in particular pragmatically sees electronic books as far tidier than the traditional text, which is an interesting concept. The others surf and peruse the Internet in a similar manner to my own browsing at a book store. The question arises as to how the school system can support this phenomenon, which I will address in the final chapter.

CHAPTER 5:

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS: PART 2:

FILLING IN THE GAPS

Chapter 4 introduced the students and began to explore the first guiding question that drives this research. This chapter will continue with that topic but will also begin to address the second question that guided this research: How might such a study help teachers and teacher educators gain insight into productive pedagogical strategies and approaches for students who appear disenchanted with in-school reading?

Chapter 4 was mainly a discussion of the reading histories and experiences of the six participants, whereas this chapter will begin to distill their thoughts and beliefs about their current academic situation. While analyzing and attempting to digest what the students reported about their current situation, I was drawn into the concept of what Maniates et al. (2001) referred to as "classroom climates for learning" (p. xv) and Vitto (2003) christened "relationship-driven classrooms" (p. 4). The students recounted, not lessons on adverbs and adjectives or character development, but impressions and feelings that captured their experiences in the ELA 10-2 plus program and in other classroom settings as well.

Gathering the data and organizing the findings into cohesive and meaningful reflections was challenging; however, I used the students' discussions to guide the overall plan. I begin with the revealing and certainly insightful confessions on the students' work habits and then move on to features and characteristics that emerged when the students discussed the ELA 10-2 Plus program. What was paramount during the entire time that I visited the classroom and participated in the activities was the relationship between the students and the teacher. Acknowledging that relationship, I have divided their thoughts into a number of themes under the umbrella topic of connecting, with the subheadings of Mr. T.: A Profile, Acceptance and Encouragement, Flexibility, Choice, and Routines. Many of the areas of discussion highlight some of the unique characteristics of the routines and ways of "doing business" that exist in the classroom, and some of the discussion focuses on the relationship between the community of learners.

I hope that this compilation of experiences and thoughts reflects the uniqueness of this setting. As Merriam (2001) stated:

> Writing the final report is much like the entire process of conducting a qualitative research study: it is as much an art as a science. While we have examples, guidelines, and other people's experiences to draw upon, the process as well as the end product will reflect the uniqueness, peculiarities, and idiosyncrasies of each research situation (p. 245).

Weaving together a meaningful and authentic tapestry that depicts this learning community was my goal.

Reflections on Student Work Habits

Maxwell and Meiser (2001) reminded us that "no matter how well we teach, learning ultimately belongs to the student" (p. 29). Whether teaching students how to throw a football, create a collage, or become engaged with a novel, we have a responsibility to teach students how to learn (Alvermann & Phelps, 1994) to make them feel successful and want to continue to learn. Whether they choose to do so or not we cannot determine, but it is important that they be given the tools that make learning easier.

One such tool is an awareness of the personal, intimate manner in which we think about our own thinking. Wilhelm, Baker, and Dubé (2001) discussed metacognition and reading and reiterated the belief that the ability to reflect and understand how one thinks and functions when faced with tasks is crucial. He described his own research with a group of students:

> Throughout the process, students were given a metacognitive vocabulary, frame, and voice. This is important because readers must become aware of and alert to their behaviors to be in control of them. Becoming aware of reading processes creates the possibility of changing and improving one's use of these strategic processes. As a result, I believe that students began to set about the business of learning how to learn and learning how to read in creative and productive ways (p. 85).

The six students in the current study all had some perception of their progress, performance, or, in some cases, lack of performance in school-related tasks. They have had years of practice in classrooms and have a fairly good idea of their own strengths and weaknesses.

Master K. discussed his work habits in the following manner:

> If I just try, try to work like I was doing school in Seaview, if I try the work, I can do it. When . . . I was in Seaview, I was doing everything the way my dad taught me. I would study lots, and then when I studied, I'd go and do a test, and he would read the question. . . . I did online schooling. All it was . . . [was] a Web site that they gave you for all your work, so I would go to the Web site and do the test, and you could use your book for help. But I found that I have to use the book for maybe two or three questions out of fifty, and I was just getting the rest of them. So I'd be pretty much acing the test.

Master K.'s apparent success while he was home-schooled could have been the result of a number of factors, such as the immediacy of feedback from his father and the online program. Kaplan and Owrings (2002) emphasized that rapid feedback and consequent monitoring and connecting with other learning are essential, and this appears to have occurred during Master K.'s time at Seaview. His perceived successful experience could also be a result of some short-term, captivating methods of instruction.

It should also be noted that Master K. enjoys working with computers, and this format may have stimulated him considerably. Questions might also arise about the rigor of the program and the possibility that Master K. did not have to stretch himself to achieve success.

Recently, however, Master K. has not met with much academic success: "I didn't pass last semester" because "I didn't hand in. I handed only a couple assignments in." This could be the result of his disengagement from the task or a lack of supervision, accountability, or connection that was evident earlier. Also, the online format was a novelty for him, and he may have found the return to the traditional classroom methodology somewhat restrictive. He is a very social young man as well, and he may have slipped because of the distractions at this new and very large high school.

Constantine repeated the English 10-2 course because

> I didn't really care. It was just like, You know what? The world can just go away. ["Why?"] Bad time really. Just different. My parents, they weren't getting along; just stuff like that. And I was just like, You know what? I don't need school. And so I pretty much skipped most of last year. And my lungs, I had bad lungs. I don't smoke or anything, but I had pneumonia for a year and a half or something, and it ate away at one of my lungs. I have bad lungs. . . . I was in cosmetology, and I enjoyed that a lot, but the toxins in the classroom, the chemicals, hurt my lungs, so I couldn't go to it. And by the end of the day I would just be exhausted, so I just didn't do well. I'd be like, "I'm going home."

Constantine has experienced difficulty for a number of reasons. Her physical state has affected her emotional state, and she simply shuts down. Moreover, she did not mention any connections with friends or teachers. It is fairly easy to go unnoticed in such a large school, and Constantine represents many students who simply fall through the cracks in large, bustling schools. It does not appear that Constantine has been required to be accountable in any way, and her lack of engagement is disturbing. She seems to have just "floated" along and was probably on the verge of dropping out of school. Fortunately, her experiences this year have resulted in a more positive attitude and far more positive results, as I will discuss later in this chapter and the next.

Even though Jennai reported that she had no difficulty learning to read and that she reads recreationally, her last mark in English was not sufficient to earn her a passing grade, and she stated that "I don't really put all my effort into my work, because if I did, then I'd probably be passing. But I suppose it also had to do with the relationship with my teacher." When pressed for details, Jennai elaborated:

> The teacher was nice, but the strategies that she used to run the class, it's not that I didn't like them, because I wasn't really introduced to any other strategies, but she didn't really make it exciting. And English isn't something that's really hard to make exciting. Well, what she did, she stuck straight to a teaching criteria; she would not let us try different things. I'm pretty sure she had this book because she'd always be reading what to do next, and then she'll be looking in the book. . . . She will be like "Okay, let's do poetry," and then she'll do it exactly, every single thing.

Because there was no opportunity to delve into the circumstances surrounding Jennai's previous coursework, I will avoid the pitfalls of speculation by simply repeating Feinstein's (2004) description of the nature of the adolescent brain:

> The adolescent brain really does want to learn more about the world we live in and less about the student who enters the classroom to collect the attendance, but it values novelty and unpredictability. Not even a lecture and slide show about alien technology would hold your students' attention for long without these two elements! (p. 18)

Jennai is an extremely vibrant and gregarious young woman who requires novelty or at least some form of motivation to become engaged. It is obvious from her comments that she was not receiving what she needed. Jennai believed that she was placed in the ELA 10-2 Plus program because

> last year in Grade 9, my language arts teacher, because I wasn't handing in my work and stuff, . . . she decided that she was going to put me in 10-2 Plus English. And then I went to get assessed, and they found out that my English level is at a Grade 12 level, and they didn't know why I was I was doing this. But it was because I was being lazy and I didn't want to hand in my work and I found the work really boring. . . . It was easy to the point it was getting boring, so I just stopped doing it, and I couldn't unblock myself. I could not make myself do it.

I asked Jennai to elaborate:

> It was just, I found the work is so repetitive: . . . The same thing we did in English in Grade 9, we did it in Grade 8, . . . almost the exact same thing. Like the novel study, we did the exact same novel [*The Giver*], but I think that was an accident because . . . it is a really good book, but the fact that we did it twice—and I got in trouble because I tried to work ahead because I had already did [it]. . . . So I just figured, Okay, if you don't want me to work ahead, then I'm not doing anything at all. And I got really upset about it because she wouldn't let me work ahead or take it home. . . . But I already read the book. . . . But after a while, it just . . . gets really annoying after a while.

Jennai's behavior is symptomatic of the disengagement that occurs when, according to Bushman and Haas (2001), students are not given the opportunity to see the connection between literature and their own lives. Jennai's experience of having to reread what she considered a "really good book" and do yet another set of lock-step assignments alienated her to the point that she opted out. Reading the same book twice could have been engaging for her if she had been given the opportunity to respond in a different manner than she already had. Pennac (1994) cautioned that "through their long years of education, grade school and high school students are made to produce more than enough analysis and commentary to frighten them away from books" (p. 161). It seems almost unimaginable that, in this era of wonderful, motivating adolescent literature, Jennai would be forced to read the same book two years in a row. Simply unimaginable! I can only speculate on why this might have occurred. Certainly the decision was made devoid of any sense of the nature of the adolescent, and I am disturbed that once the repetition was discovered, nothing was changed. Ivey and Baker (2004) concluded, "Effective literacy instruction for adolescents focuses on their individual interests and uses diverse reading materials, such as engaging trade books and digital texts" (p. 37). It is unfortunate that this did not occur for Jennai.

Hayley has exceptionally mature verbal ability and takes responsibility for her school experiences, which include failing ELA 10-2 last year:

> I don't know, honestly. I know it's my fault that I blew it. I just didn't do the work. Why? I don't know. I mean, yes, sure, there's the problems that I've always had, but they shouldn't be getting in the way any more. So I mean, if I worked, they shouldn't be getting in the way, but—

Hayley's inability to complete written assignments has been problematic during her entire school career. She has the cognitive ability to critically analyze texts and make sophisticated inferences and comparisons among themes, yet she cannot organize her thoughts into a clear, well-scripted written response. Years of remedial help, special assistance, and tutoring have still not provided her with the necessary skills and strategies. At this point it might be a valid supposition that she will never be able to conquer the essay, book report, or social studies project. Perhaps it is enough for her to communicate verbally (at which she excels) and through her computer. She likes reading; she does not like writing. Hayley does not fit into Pennac's (1994) metaphor of the school as a factory. She is the square peg that does not fit into the round hole, and perhaps she should be valued for her 'squareness,' not condemned because she is not round.

Both Cyrus and Steve have developed strategies to help them cope with their respective reading difficulties. It is of interest that both of the young men referred to their mothers' support and knew that they could be relied upon to offer any other assistance. They also stated that their mothers are readers and encourage them to read at home.

Steve expressed some frustration with previous reading experiences, in particular with teachers who say they will help:

> When parents kind of get involved, they [teachers] just say what the parents want to hear. But when you're at school they totally don't listen to what you say or what you have to get done or anything. They just do what they do, and if you can't stay up, then you just fall behind. They don't try to help you or anything.

Steve added:

> Last year I think I missed more than half the year just because everything had to [be] read and every teacher was on me. And it just got to the point where—it just gets me mad because they say to your parents what they say to you. How they act in class, it's a big show. . . . It's either fair or it's not. It was their way, or you fall behind.

Steve's way of coping was to simply shut down and avoid the situation. Vitto (2003) remarked that "students will go to great lengths to avoid tasks when they do not feel that they can be successful. They would much rather be seen as a rebel, troublemaker, or class clown than be viewed as dumb" (p. 103). Smith and Wilhelm (2004) pointed out, "Boys who do not experience competence with literacy tasks will avoid them and thus become even less competent" (p. 456). Thus, a vicious cycle is created.

The fact that Steve has missed as much school as he has indicates that he appears to be extremely frustrated with his lack of control and his obvious lack of reading ability. The ongoing practice of requiring reading in other subjects has led to further feelings of failure and alienation. Chambers (1969) suggested that books are not necessarily the best tools to teach science, geography, math. Yet we continue to push books and are distressed that books become the enemy.

Cyrus was the only participant who during the time that I was in the classroom openly admitted to having a reading disability. Shaywitz and Shaywitz (2004) explained that "reading reflects language, and reading disability reflects a deficit within the language system" (p. 7). Of all of the participants, Cyrus was the most difficult to understand. His responses were terse, and I found deciphering the transcripts difficult because he often mumbled and dropped the pitch of his voice until what he was saying was almost incomprehensible. Perhaps he did not want to be heard or he felt that what he had to say might be construed as incorrect.

The students gave me some candid glimpses into their learning processes and habits. A lack of motivation combined with a sense of futility and frustration are evident in their conversations. Steve and Jennai's apparent anger towards previous teachers resulted in their shutting down. Constantine's emotional state affected her learning, whereas Cyrus, Hayley, and Master K. acknowledge their difficulties clearly and honestly. Students should be encouraged to monitor and reflect upon their own learning; however many of our classrooms do not encourage this valuable self-examination, nor are adjustments made to help students to self-assess and reflect on their personal progress.

Connecting and Building Relationships

Master K. was the only student who specifically spoke positively about a teacher who had helped him with reading in the past. Both Steve and Jennai recounted difficulties, and Hayley and Constantine did not comment at all. Cyrus referred to the reading assistance that he had received but did not specifically comment on a teacher.

Wilhelm (2003), Alvermann and Phelps (1998), Beers (2003), Vitto (2003), and Stronge (2002) all stressed the importance of getting to know students and finding out what interests them, what they are good at, what they wish for. Sizer's (1999) comment sets the tone for the following section: "We cannot teach students well if we do not know them well. At its heart, personalized learning requires profound shifts in our thinking about education and schooling" (p. 6).

The participants may have been reticent in speaking about past teachers, but all six students had something to say about Mr. T. The following is some background on this important figure.

Mr. T.: A Profile

At the time of the research Mr. T. (his choice of pseudonym) had been teaching at this large high school for five years. Prior to that he had taught junior high language arts for two years. He was involved in the Plus program from the beginning and had taught the 10-2 plus for one semester every subsequent year. He also teaches combinations of ELA 20-1, ELA 30-1, and the demanding Advanced Placement ELA 30. In addition to his teaching load, Mr. T. is a member of a Grade 12 teacher advisory group and coaches the junior boys' football team.

When I first met Mr. T., his hair was drawn back in a ponytail, and he was wearing cord pants and a casual shirt. When I returned the following September, the ponytail was gone, but the casual, comfortable clothing was still evident. I observed an easy, relaxed relationship with his students. He is current on contemporary music, sports, movies, computers, cars, and pets. Students engage in casual, non-school-related discussions and appear to enjoy "kibitzing" with him. Both males and females interact and participate in a variety of discussions.

When I formally interviewed Mr. T., he stressed that one of his major goals was to "spark interest in literature again, having the kids believe that they can actually read and write. And again, it's important that they graduate, [that] they're getting out of the class and successfully getting into [English] 20 and 30."

Mr. T. reflected upon his teaching and reported that his own teaching had altered considerably since he began to work with the Plus students:

> When I first started teaching, I expected that you did things one way and that all kids would respond to one or two techniques or one or two methods. And that is not true any more. My level of patience and compassion has gone up steadily every year dealing with them.
>
> I think that probably they realized early on at a younger age that they had weaknesses in certain areas and that they just weren't given the support they needed to get over it. And it was just, their frustrations increased, increased, increased.

Mr. T. exhibits several qualities that Stronge (2002) considered essential for effective teaching: "Effective teachers practice focused and sympathetic listening to show students they care not only what happens in the classroom, but about students' lives in general. These teachers initiate two-way communication that exudes trust, tact, honesty, humility and care" (p. 14). Over the course of the semester I observed Mr. T. manifest many of those qualities. He listened and acknowledged when students were troubled, he backed off to avoid possible conflicts when students entered the classroom and appeared to be agitated or angry, and he joked and laughed with them.

Steve recognized the connection between Mr. T. and himself:

> He's probably the only teacher that I can joke around with, and we just talk normally. And I think it's good because then he treats me as a friend, and I treat

> him as a friend. It's easier to do the work, and it makes the atmosphere more better.

Steve elaborated:

> There is no pressure. It's not, you have to do it that way or that's it. He works around what you need, and he works around whatever makes you want to do the work. That's what he'll do. And if you help him out, he'll help you out.

Mendes (2003) commented that "students do respond just because we care" (p. 56): "Earning the respect of students is not enough. Students must perceive that we care, and even that we like them deep down, as people. . . . They will work harder for someone they like than for someone they simply respect" (p. 56). Daniels (2005) supported this premise: "Young adolescents are not looking, then, for easy teachers who let them slide by with minimal effort. Instead the students want teachers who care about student learning, hold high expectations for all students, and provide the necessary support" (p. 53).

Hall and Hall (2003) cited Ahlstrom and Havighurst's (1971) six-year study in which they investigated 200 at-risk youth and found that the handful who were able to turn their lives around had all had the same experience:

> Each had developed a special relationship with either a teacher or a work supervisor during the treatment program. These adults valued the students, treated them as individuals, and expressed faith in their ability to succeed. A strong relationship with an adult enables an at-risk youth to make life altering changes (p. 60).

Jennai is not in the high-risk category that Ahlstrom and Havighurst (1971; as cited in Hall & Hall, 2003) researched; however, she agreed with Steve's statement that

> he [Mr. T.] just makes it so easy, and he kind of relates to us. The teacher that I have now [Mr. T.], he has all of these different strategies, and I really like the way

> he works with us. And he doesn't really make us feel like his equal, but he doesn't really treat us like he's high above us.

Constantine recognized that

> he knows how we learn, and that's what it is. . . . The other day when I found my friend was dying, I was not having a good day at all. And he just said, "Put your earphones on and just do some work, and you'll get through it." And he knows [how] to get to kids that are jittery. He'll be like, "Just do your work. As long as you can do whatever, just as long as you're doing your work." He can get through to those kids that don't want got through to.

She continued:

> I think [Mr. T] understands how most of the kids in the 10-2 Plus have ADD, ADHD, dyslexia, that fiddling. and other teachers don't know how to handle that. They don't let you be who you are. They try to make you be who you're supposed to be.

Constantine exhibits typical characteristics of the teenager. She wants to be accepted for who she is and values the fact that Mr. T. sees her as a person and understands when she is having difficulty. Rosenblatt (1957) stressed that we teach individuals, not generalities or groups with similar needs and characteristics. According to Wessler (2003):

> Students want to be treated as individuals—to have their personal experiences with traumatic events valued and to have their own opinions validated. . . . To develop a respectful classroom, we must respect students by valuing their emotions and their lives outside the classroom. When students believe that teachers respect and care about their feelings, they are more likely to respect themselves and their classmates. (p. 42)

Constantine, like Steve, confirmed that it is important for teachers to build a relationship with students so that the students feel safe and can ask difficult, possibly revealing questions:

> Try to get some kind of friend relationship—you know, higher class than student relationship—so that the kid can actually not feel nervous to talk to you about

> something. So if you're struggling with something, you're not afraid [say], "I don't understand." Friends help each other, and I know teachers aren't supposed to be friends with students, but it makes a kid feel more at home or at ease.

Hayley appreciated the fact that Mr. T. stays current with teenagers' interests:

> The teacher is nice—a bit scary. ["Why?"] My friend made me a CD. In the beginning of class he lets us have the music on, and some girl started talking, and then he started singing the words to one of the songs my friend put on my CD. [Hayley was astounded that he knew the song.] He's a nice guy.

Vitto (2003) stated that "when we talk with students about who they are, we communicate a caring message, one that makes students feel important and cared for" (p. 66). Stronge (2002) summed up the qualities of a connecting, caring teacher:

> Obviously, the characteristics of caring go well beyond knowing the student to include qualities such as patience, trust, honesty, and courage. Specific teacher attributes that show caring include listening, gentleness, understanding, knowledge of student as individuals, warmth and encouragement, and an overall love for children. (p. 14)

During my five-month visit to this classroom, I witnessed all of the above in the interactions, and in discussions with Mr. T., he spoke objectively, yet caringly about this group of students. He was cognizant of each student's strengths and weaknesses, and he also knew that this group is very astute:

> You have to be incredibly patient with them. And, finally, . . . if you don't genuinely like being around them, they will see through that in fifteen seconds, and your life is going to be rough from that point on. If you don't like being around these types of kids, don't do it because it will be a rough ride.

It is important that teachers recognize individual differences and acknowledge real or perceived hardships and crises. Mr. T. respectfully acknowledged Constantine's trauma over losing a friend and Jennai's fears about changing schools. He calmly and pragmatically responded ("Well, you knew what would happen") to Master K.'s sharing of a situation that could lead to possible disciplinary action. He also handled other situations in which students reported conflicts with other teachers in the same calm manner ("So what are *you* going to do about it?"). Mr. T. is open and accepting, and he genuinely appears to enjoy the discussions with many of the students.

Acceptance and Encouragement

Accepting students for who they are and not what they can be made into is the foundation of a relationship-driven classroom. Students will feel, according to Maniates et al. (2001), that they belong and that they can learn.

Stipek (2006) concurred: "Adolescents report that they work harder for teachers who treat them as individuals and express interest in their personal lives outside school" (p. 46). Furthermore, "Being a caring and supportive teacher does not mean coddling: rather it means holding students accountable while providing the support they need to succeed" (p. 47).

Master K. was very reluctant to discuss his past; however, I pressed him to tell me about *some* experiences that he remembered:

> Grades 7 to 8, . . . the teachers weren't very good at teaching the stuff to me because I'm not a fast—I don't grasp onto the concepts as fast as other people do. And I found that they didn't pay much attention to me. They just told me what to do, and then they let me go and try to figure it out myself, and I didn't do very good. . . . So I didn't like Grade 7 or 8. Then I went in Grade 9 and got home schooled. My dad was right there helping me with everything that I needed to do, . . . and I was like 98% for that English or for the LA course. . . . And then coming back to school and then going to school here.

He also recollected:

> From coming back from being home-schooled, the teacher there was a past teacher that taught my brother and likes my brother a lot. So she helped me out and likes me, and she made sure I understand everything and get the point across. And . . . Grade 9 was the most English I've enjoyed.

Obviously, Master K. feels the need for acceptance, to feel that he is capable of learning, even though he considers himself slow. The teacher who had taught his brother made a connection with him, accepted him, and, more important, liked him; consequently, Master K. has a better concept of himself as a learner. He experienced this acceptance and understanding from Mr. T:

> He goes one-on-one with you. If you need help, he'll help you. And if you have something to talk about that you need help with, yes, he'll help you. And he just is always there for help, and if you have any problems let him know. And he's understanding and just helps you along. He's just helped me understand it, and he doesn't freak out if you can't get it or anything. He's patient.

In a similar vein, Hayley stated:

> It's more . . . do it at your own pace. . . . I always get projects half done, three quarters done, almost all the way done, . . . and then I get stuck. That's why I need motivation, someone to come up and ask me if it's okay, tell me that it's okay. But before, I didn't even do that. ["And you are now?"] No. It's more, I need someone to come up and give me encouragement and stuff, and "Yes, that's good." But this class has given me more, . . . it doesn't really matter what people think. Just do your work.

Hayley appreciated the casual, easygoing manner in which Mr. T motivates her. He is aware of her personal struggles yet stresses the need for completion.

Jennai also commented on Mr. T.'s clear, straightforward, professional manner:

> I felt really bad because I said I was going to try harder, and I just couldn't pull myself up to doing it. I could [tell] that my teacher got, not really angry, but a little upset about it. And he didn't say anything to me; . . . he just said, "If this is what you really want to do, then you can do it, but I'd encourage you to get your work done." And I felt really bad—that was it—because he's a really nice teacher, and I'd like to do whatever I can do to pass his class, to show him that he's actually shown me something. And he has shown me something. Yes, he's shown me a lot.

Vitto (2003) warned that "the natural tendency to focus the conversations with the students on what they are lacking does not build the relationship and can make matters worse" (p. 62). Instead, it is important, Vitto continued, that "teachers . . . find the right amount of self-disclosure, so students see them as genuine, place a tremendous amount of emphasis on mutual respect and have an uncanny ability for finding the right balance between being firm, fair and friendly" (p. 65).

Mr. T. exhibits that balance of firmness—he told the class, "If you pull it off [stay on task during the lesson on symbols], you'll get a reward" (movie Friday); fairness—he explained to Hayley, "It is up to you to do this work"; and friendliness—he discussed the previous evening's showing of *Survivor* and laughed about the results.

Constantine, as expected, had some very astute comments on encouragement:

> He encourages kids to do their best. Even if they are doing really bad, he will go, "You can pull your mark up." He'll encourage them really. He stresses how much we're important to him and our marks are important to him, so he kind of makes us feel that we're not just doing if for ourselves; we're also doing it for the teacher.

The students felt that Mr. T. cares about them personally. They realized that he is doing a job, but they also felt that they are important and that he wanted them to do well. He guides, nudges, and prompts students to complete assignments, as in Hayley's case, or to deal with issues, as Master K. and Jennai must do.

Flexibility

Vitto (2003) considered flexibility an integral facet of a relationship-driven classroom, and it is not surprising that when I interviewed both Mr. T. and Madame M., they defined flexibility as the most essential quality required to work with all students, not just the Plus students. Mr. T. stressed:

> You have to be flexible and approachable. You have to realize that they don't learn the same way that the majority of kids learn. You have to be open to the fact that if they don't want to read something, that it doesn't matter what you do, they

> will not do that for the day. You could dance with sparklers and they would not care.

Although the participants did not use the term *flexible*, they were nevertheless aware that Mr. T. is not rigid in his teaching and assessment. Hayley, with her history of noncompletions, was conscious and appreciative of the fact that she was receiving credit for partial assignments:

> Despite how much I do—because I've had it engrained in my head . . . that if it's not finished all the way, it's a zero—and I found that my teacher [Mr. T] doesn't say that: . . . "You won't get all the points, but you will get the points for what you have."

Steve also noted a difference from his past experiences:

> When we had to pick a book and read it and do all the work on it, . . . yes, I've done it in the past, but not with someone that understands and helps you with the work. And if he says "A page and a half," he'll go around your needs and he'll say "A page."

Master K. recounted an experience in which he had not completed the entire novel:

> We've done a novel study and I've read sort of half of the book, and then I just went from that [i.e., he did some work on what he had read], because . . . I found the book interesting and everything, but it just didn't appeal to me to read.

Master K. also appreciated that Mr. T. "gave us a certain amount of time and let us just work on our own and talk to friends and just do it the way we wanted to do it."

All three of these students acknowledged Mr. T's willingness to accept whatever contributions they made. Because they have a history of abandoning assignments and subsequent failure, the fact that they would still engage in some form of written work was commendable. The classroom practice of taking in the day's work may be a factor in

Mr. T's receiving only partial work on assignments; however, some of the work that the students submitted had been completed at home.

Cyrus noted that Mr. T. is flexible in assessing progress:

> He kind of teaches us how to react. So if we react different, he teaches us in a different way. If we do bad on tests, he gives us a chance to make the first one; and if we do bad, he doesn't give us tests any more; he'll give us big projects.

Cyrus also reported, "Well, it's more like we work at our own pace. [It's] not like these have to be handed in on these days. He gives us a whole bunch that have to be handed in at the end of the month."

Hayley commented that

> deadlines are very flexible. You can hand stuff in from the unit you finished. Well, pretty much you can hand anything in, but the deadline is a month before report cards. Even stuff from the first unit is a month before report cards. So if you're having trouble with one unit—if you get the first unit and you're having trouble with it and the second unit is a breeze, do the second unit and go back and do the first unit.

Constantine thought that, although deadlines are a reality, unforeseen circumstances arise, and it is important to recognize them:

> Extensions are good because you don't know what's going on in a kid's life, just like we don't know what's going on in a teacher's life. And some of the kids go, "I didn't get my homework done." Then they[other teachers] can be like "Blah, blah, blah, blah," because you can't really say, "The reason why I didn't get it done is because I slack." You never know what's going on. I know I slack this year, but that's because I lost my dog, I lost one of my good friends, parents are fighting, everything. So you can't say you slack. I like . . . how he lets you have an extension if you tell him what's happening—why you're angry, why you're sad, why you didn't get it done. And then he comes to an understanding. So extensions are good.

Stronge (2002) considered this empathy essential for teachers:

> Many educational stakeholders emphasize that effective teachers know their students individually, not only understanding each student's learning style and

> needs, but also understanding the students' personality, likes and dislikes, and personal situations that may affect behavior and performance in school. Effective teachers care for the student first as a person, and second as a student. They respect each student as an individual. (p. 15)

Stronge's statement about respect for the student as an individual is profound. Giving an extension for an assignment or partial marks for work handed in only makes sense. Too often students will give up and not bother to hand in any work; what is accomplished in this case? The student has no opportunity to show what he or she has learned, and the teacher has no idea what skills, strategies, or concepts the student has learned or partially learned. The essential component of feedback cannot occur; there is nothing to be learned from a mark of zero! How can differentiation occur if the teacher has no idea of what needs to be taught or retaught?

Also, the practice of docking marks for late assignments raises questions. Authentic assessment requires that the teacher, or in some cases the student, honestly evaluate the extent to which a concept has been understood or an outcome has been met. If the assignment is handed in late and because of some criteria that is not pedagogically sound it is docked, say, 10% per day, how authentic is the grade?

Mr. T's flexible, nonpunitive approach is logical and effective and should be a model for other teachers. This topic will resurface in the final chapter.

Choice

Sullo (2007) wrote:

> As humans, we are also motivated to be free, to choose. Having choices is part of what it means to be human and is one reason our species has been able to evolve, adapt and thrive. Effective teachers help students follow the drive to be free in a way that is respectful of others. (p. 9)

Giving students options and choices is especially paramount in working with teenagers, according to many researchers. Wilhelm (2003) suggested that many students who are plagued with reading difficulties or are reluctant to read often do not personally associate with the text that they are reading. They do not enter what Nell (1988) referred to as the *reading zone*; nor do they have a *transaction*, according to Rosenblatt (1982); and they never enter the *envisioned state*, according to Langer (2002). Instead, they decide not to participate in the process and rarely see reading as making meaning.

Applebee (as cited in Wilhelm, 2003) found very little relationship between what schools offer in the way of reading choices and what students actually want to read. Zirinsky and Rau (2001) agreed, and Ross (2001) stressed the need for choice in reading materials:

> At every stage, choice permeates the topic of reading for pleasure, starting with the initial development in childhood. . . . Being able to choose successfully among materials is an important skill that is never directly taught but is learned by readers who teach themselves. . . . Each successful book choice makes it more likely that the beginning reader will want to repeat the pleasurable experience by reading something further. (pp. 8-9)

According to Allington (2001):

> If struggling middle and high school students in your school experience a steady diet of hard, boring (in their view) books, there is no reason to be surprised that they exhibit little in the way of literacy development (and academic progress) during the middle and high school years. . . . [There are] too few opportunities to self-select, [and] it may be the critical decline in the access in school to reading materials considered interesting that contributes more to the fall off in voluntary reading. (p. 141)

Hayley, who was repeating the 10-2 program, saw the difference between the two English programs as the choice that the Plus program allows:

> The curriculum itself is the same as that in 10-2. I have been in 10-2, and it's the same except for the fact that when we did the novel study [in the Plus program].

> We got to pick our own books, which meant people who could not read as well, like the people with the lower reading levels, could pick easier books to do, and the high reading levels could do the harder books. And we all had to do the same amount of work on them, but really, it depended on the amount of chapters you had, the length of the book. . . . The longer the book, the more stuff you needed to have.

In Steve's exit interview I asked him what he enjoyed about this year: "Probably the novel, yes. I asked the librarian, 'Can I have a sports book?' and she turned around and picked out a hockey book. I was like, 'Great!'" For Steve to read a book,

> it would have to be on hockey. If it was either about a new player or a new company or skates or something like that, I'd read it. It's not like my parents try to recommend things or my teachers. It's just, if I don't find it interesting, then there's not a hope in the world for me to read it.

This statement probably offers a partial glimpse into why Steve has had so much difficulty in school: Prior to this year he had never been allowed to choose; he had always been told what to do and what to read.

Steve's comment supports Vitto's (2003) statement that

> when we give choices to students about their learning, self determination, shared ownership, involvement and motivation all are enhanced. . . . If teachers wish to maximize motivation, they should strive to help students understand the value of social activities and structure tasks so that student effort leads to success. (pp. 110-111)

Students should also, according to Vitto, "make a connection between what they will be learning and how and why it is important to them" (p. 119).

Steve's obvious feeling of empowerment must be viewed with caution, however, because, as Henson and Gillis (2003) pointed out, "It takes years of experiences for learners to believe they are *stupid*, so it is reasonable to expect that these feelings will not go way after a few successes" (p. 262).

In a similar vein, Jennai also discussed choice:

> This year we got to pick our own novels. Last year they picked our novels for us, and we had to read with the class. [This year] we got to bring our novels home and read on our own as long as we got done on the deadline.

Constantine agreed that students' being able to choose their own books "is good. Finding something that everyone likes is hard. So if you find something every individual likes, . . . [that is] better."

Besides choosing the reading materials, students in the Plus program have an opportunity to select where they sit and with whom they work. Walkmans, IPods, and other electronic devices are permitted when seatwork begins. Hayley explained:

> We get to sit wherever, and that helps because there's a reward for being the first person in class. You get to sit in the comfy chair. You sit where you want. If you want to sit alone, you find a nice corner, a nice spot by yourself. You can move the desks by yourself. You can even work out in the hallway; if you need quiet to do your work, you get quiet. If you need a large and rambunctious group to work, you get to be a loud, rambunctious group to work, as long as it's to a degree.

Daniels (2005) stressed the need for choice:

> Adolescents want to feel as though they are a welcome part of the group. They also want to be unique and carve out their own place in the world. When teachers recognize the burden that this dichotomy imposes, we can help our students navigate the new territory, thereby focusing their time and emotional energy on the instruction taking place in class. For example, when teachers let friends sit next to one another in class and teach them to make appropriate behavioral choices after being given this freedom, we address not only valuable life skills but also students' social needs. (p. 54)

Cyrus agreed:

> We kind of can sit wherever we want ["And you can't in other classes?"] Well, we can; just sometimes you usually can't move. If we want to move here, we can move. And he [Mr. T.] has the couch there; he just tries to make it more enjoyable for us to learn.

Giving students the opportunity to choose where to sit, with whom to work, and what to read are minor classroom variations, yet they can have a profound impact on the learning environment. The fact that the students recognized and appreciated these facets of the classroom shows that they should be more prevalent in other classrooms.

Routines

Maniates et al. (2001) emphasized the importance of following traditions or routines in working with students because routines allow stability and give students parameters. The students did not go into detail about the classroom routines, but I observed several over the course of the semester. One such routine was that every day Mr. T. wrote a new comment, thought of the day, or slogan on the chalkboard, and I watched as each student read the message as he or she settled down at a desk. Many times it was the first thing that the students looked for when they entered the room. Often they would stand and read the phrase before they even sat down. Related discussions sometimes followed; however, often one or two students just copied down the saying. Several times after class when we were debriefing, other students came to see Mr. T., and they too made a point of reading the inscription on the blackboard, often without comment. This visual prompt, usually a quotation or saying, encouraged students to read and reflect and sometimes was a lead-in to the mini lesson that he would teach that day. On one particular day Mr. T. quoted a headline from a CBC news special that had aired the previous night. The results of a study showed that boys were falling behind girls in all subjects in school. As expected, it sparked a tremendously vibrant and animated discussion.

Mr. T. always greeted the students at the door when they entered, and he used this time to catch up on home news or discuss the football game or new movie release. He stays current with contemporary music, as was evident in several discussions that occurred, and he is interested in the students' responses. He fosters a climate of respect and genuinely appears to be interested in the students' opinions and thoughts. He would ask, "How did the religion exam go?" or "How was football practice?" or wondered whether "the Stampeders should have traded a player." On one occasion Mr. T. quietly inquired about the health of one student's parent, and on another he asked Constantine, "How are things going in science?" as a follow-up to a conflict that she had shared with him earlier in the week. Hinchman, Alvermann, Boyd, Brozo, and Vacca (2003) reinforced the need for teachers to be aware of what is happening in the complex lives of their students. Mr. T. certainly made an effort, and the students appreciated it.

Other daily teaching practices that the students noted and appreciated included what Steve described as

> a modified day. You go in, and you listen for twenty minutes of what he does. You take notes. I don't mind doing that. You listen and you have five minutes to talk or whatever because you've been quiet for twenty minutes, and that's a really good thing. And then you do your work on your own. And that's what I just love about him: I can do all the work. It's just, I hate how there's someone hovering over you and all that. He's not. He's there to help you. But if you have a question, you go ask him, and then you're off to do your own work. That's what I like about him.

Master K. also appreciated the pacing of the lessons:

> He spreads the work out. So he'll teach us a mini lesson first, then he'll give us a five-minute break just to get our talking out from what he's trying to teach us. Then we go into our own individual work and work on our projects that he assigned for us, for the rest of the class. And it's an easygoing class, but also you can get work done. And he teaches the class very good.

Jennai summed up the experience:

> It just kind of refreshes my memory. I'm like, I know this. It's just really laidback. You still have to get your work done, but it's laidback, and you can relax because we're allowed to listen to music and eat and drink in our class. And

> pretty much any other class, you're not allowed to do that. But just as long as we get our work done.

Constantine confirmed her classmates' appreciation of Mr. T.:

> He's a good teacher. You can tell he has the entire year planned out for you before you actually walk into the classroom, and I like that about a teacher. If all teachers were like that, then I would probably like most of my classes.

She added:

> He can get through to us. You get more one-on-one help because we have time to do it. He's got the class set up for us. And it's pretty much, if you don't get it, don't [blame others]; that's your problem. And he makes it clear.

Although Stronge (2002) stressed the importance of teachers' developing relationships with their students, he also acknowledged the need for classroom management and organization: "Careful preparation, planning of objectives and activities, and long term planning ensures coverage of curriculum across a marking period, semester and year. [It is important that teachers] select strategies to propel students' learning" (p. 33).

Summary

Cyrus's statement that Mr. T. "just tries to make it more enjoyable for us to learn" is a very succinct, yet insightful snapshot of the ELA 10-2 Plus classroom environment. Mr. T encourages students to learn in a safe, collaborative environment. He does not discourage the inherent social nature of the adolescent, but instead facilitates interactive, meaningful learning. The students value group work, as well as individual choice. The working environment was fluid, with groups working together around a cluster of desks or with partners collaborating at the classroom computer. On some days Hayley would be curled up with her laptop at the far end of the room and Constantine would be spread out on the floor working on her Shakespeare presentation.

Vitto (2003) discussed four necessary attributes of relationship-driven classrooms: (a) Teachers accept children for who they are, (b) teachers are flexible and do not adhere rigidly to a particular lesson plan or intervention, (c) teachers choose to work with children, and (d) as human beings, these teachers are confident, realistic, and honest (p. 21). Upon closer examination of the dynamics in the Plus program, I can attest to the presence of Vitto's attributes.

Mr. T. values and accepts students, and he is willing to shift deadlines and assignments to allow them to be successful. Furthermore, even though Mr. T. teaches the prestigious Advanced Placement courses, he also chooses to work with the Plus students and constantly looks for ways to capture and motivate them.

During the later part of the term Mr. T. reported being fatigued and that he might not teach the demanding Plus program again; however, the semester break appeared to rejuvenate him, and when I returned in February, he had changed his outlook somewhat. When I returned the following September, he was back working with the next group of 10-2 Plus students.

Mr. T. admitted that his classes do not always meet the Program of Studies (Alberta Learning, 2000) outcomes, and I can confirm that during my observations I did not see the rigor or complexity of assignments that exists in other English classes. There appeared to be a considerable amount of off-task conversation, and the quality of the assignments that I saw was not remarkable; however, the students were working and were, for the most part, attending class. Ensuring that unmotivated students feel successful, encouraging at-risk students to attend class, and getting what Beers (2003) called *aliterate* students to engage at even a reduced standard of achievement is indeed a delicate balance.

The final chapter will also elaborate on my discussions with Mr. T. and Madame M. Both professionals have valuable insights into the students and the program that need to be voiced. The chapter will, however, allow these dynamic and delightful students to have the last word.

CHAPTER 6:

PULLING THE THREADS TOGETHER

As with any research work, certain limitations and restrictions are embedded in the project. This concluding chapter highlights some of these factors, includes data that indicate levels of success, and gathers together and distills some of the final reflections of the six students and the teachers involved in the study. Finally, I will address the two underlying research questions that fuelled this research and offer recommendations for further related research.

Limitations and Delimitations

The major limitation of this study is the fact that the research was limited to one group of students who returned signed permission forms and who were enrolled in an English program located in a specific high school for one specific semester. I selected six students for the in-depth one-on-one interviews and group discussions, which tightened the limits even more. I observed and formally interviewed one classroom teacher and interviewed, but did not observe, another classroom teacher who has taught in the program and was teaching the follow-up course. Several other teachers had been involved from the beginning of the project, but I interviewed only Mr. T. and Madame M. because they were both teaching the Plus program during the research period.

Another limit to this study is the subjectivity of the researcher and the analysis. As Merriam (2001) noted, the quality of the interpretation depends directly on the ability of the interpreter:

> The investigator is the primary instrument for gathering and analyzing data and, as such, can respond to the situation by maximizing opportunities for collecting and producing meaningful information. Conversely, the investigator as human

> instrument is limited by being human—that is, mistakes are made, opportunities are missed, personal biases interfere. Human instruments are as fallible as any other research instrument (p. 20).

My research skills and abilities ultimately affected the quality and richness of the interviews and analysis. My restricted background in data gathering, although greatly improved since the commencement of the research project, is certainly a major limitation. It was a constant struggle not to push or prompt responses, partially as a result of my experiences as a classroom teacher, where my role was always to keep stretching and encouraging students to learn.

End of the Term: . . . So How Did They Do?

As I expected, once the ELA 10-2 Plus course was over, the students in my study moved into other settings. I returned to the school after final examinations to gather the progress reports on the six students. Constantine, Cyrus, and Master K. had completed enough work and achieved a sufficient level on the final exam to warrant passing grades. Jennai, as a result of moving prior to her final exams, failed to earn a final exam mark. This missing mark, combined with several poor marks on term assignments, resulted in her failing the course with a mark of 28%. Steve also missed the 50% passing standard with a mark of 44%. Several of his early term assignments were poor, and even though he improved somewhat and passed the two-part final, he could not surmount those early results. Hayley failed to write one part of the final examination (and thus earned a zero) and was missing two major term assignments; therefore, with a mark of 33%, she also failed to pass the course. Thus, of the six participants, three succeeded and three had to repeat the course.

As an aside, of the 16 students who were included in the final class marks, 12 achieved above 50% and were able to move into the next English course. Keeping in mind the criterion for selection into the program—that is, a history of failure in previous language arts classes—it is noteworthy that so many class members met with a level of success. I gathered no further data on the entire group.

I returned to the school in September 2005 in an attempt to further monitor the progress of the six students. Master K. had moved back to the US in April 2005, and his records were gone. Steve had enrolled in home-schooling in 2004, and there were no records on his progress. Jennai had not returned. Constantine had successfully passed ELA 30-2, with an IPP stipulation that she be exempted from the diploma exam. She had stayed in school, had received the extra support that she needed, and had missed getting her high school diploma only because she was short one credit. Her tenacity is impressive.

In September 2005 both Hayley and Cyrus were still attending Mountainview. Hayley had eventually passed ELA 10-2 Plus in June 2004 after three tries, passed ELA 20-2 Plus after one try, and was enrolled in ELA 30-2. After successfully completing the Plus program, Cyrus received 70% in ELA 20-2 (*not* in the Plus program) and was also enrolled in ELA 30-2.

Final Reflections

Schools are in the business of teaching, and academic results are important; however, these students have been marginalized because of a variety of circumstances and have not achieved the success that many other students have. Success, particularly in school, is often viewed in terms of pass/fail, yet the students' personal reflections cast a somewhat different light. It is difficult to measure the affective side of students, but their final reflections offered a glimpse into their personal thoughts and perceptions. Their emotions and feelings were an integral part of the learning process and will be discussed in the following section.

In his exit interview Steve proudly stated:

> Now I can read in front of the class. I used to miss days of school because [although] my work would be done, I'd want to miss school because I wouldn't want to read in front of the class. And now, yes, I even [read] from books. I like to read, but now I can read in the class and read in front of the class and not be scared of what the teacher, of what the kids are going to do. . . .
>
> I'm reading not just when my parents ask me to; I'm reading when I want to read. ["What?"] Things on Sidney Crosby, the hockey player; a lot of Gretzky—info—because I had to [complete an assignment for] the program.

Steve might not have passed the course in terms of academic achievement, but he has a better sense of himself as a reader, and his self-confidence when he is faced with the difficult task of reading out loud shows marked improvement. Prior to his enrolment in the Plus program, his way of coping was simply to opt out.

Mr. T. considered the Plus program successful because of the possibility of its "sparking an interest in literature again, having the kids believe that they can actually read and write. And again, it's important that they graduate. They're getting out of the class and successfully getting into [ELA] 20 and [ELA] 30." Steve's attitude, despite the fact that he failed the course, affirms Mr. T.'s statement. Steve now views reading as a possibility.

Constantine commented on what she gained from the course:

> It's got easier to read. It's not, as you know, harsh to read. I don't even mind reading. It's easier to figure out words. If I'm struggling on a word or . . . if you don't know the word, [Mr. T taught us] to go back and look through the dictionary and actually go to the dictionary. And if it doesn't make sense, then we

> have some kind of interpretation of what it is, then come back to it, and then maybe you'll know how you can use it in a sentence.

Hayley responded to the same question as follows:

> Well, I wasn't exactly trying my best, but I think that I was trying my hardest, because I did enjoy the [class], and I wasn't really doing the work. So if I had been doing the work, it would have been a lot better.
>
> We do projects instead of tests. For me that is a drawback; for the rest of the class it isn't. . . . I know for a fact that I shouldn't be in this class. If I had got my act together—because ever since I was really little, tests were one of my strong points. ["Why?"] Because this stuff is written down, and the multiple choice—I don't know why everybody hates multiple choice, because seeing the stuff, my brain goes, No, no, yes, even without me thinking about it. Long-answer questions I don't really like; short-answer questions I can do. But projects, it just takes so much time. . . . I'm just not motivated, like when it's written work, . . . when it's simple written work, . . . need to know stuff from a book and you have to fill out the questions, . . . see how well you remember. Or you have to look it up in the book and write down the answers. Even a short paragraph. I can do that now; I couldn't before. I can now, and it's just so much easier, so much simpler.

Thus Hayley acknowledged indirectly that she has grown somewhat while taking the course, although she was convinced that getting the right answer was really the key to passing the grade.

Master K. remained rather reticent in his response to a similar question about gains. He simply stated that "it's helped me develop the language arts skills that I need to go on to a higher English." When I encouraged him to elaborate, he replied, "How to improve my writing and my understanding of just how the language works."

Jenna described her experience in the course:

> The assignments, what I really like about them is, they didn't really make us feel stupid like some of the other courses, because in my math class we're doing math that I did in Grade 4, and I remember all of it. And when I'm in that class, I feel so stupid. I feel like they're treating me like I don't know anything. Then when I'm in this class I look at some of my other friends' homework, and there is some similarity to it, except for ours is just easier, and we get to negotiate the deadlines, just as long as we get everything done.

She would recommend the course to other students because

> it's easygoing, and it makes you feel like you're at the same level as everyone. You know you're lower, right? But at least you know you're doing somewhat the same stuff. I just think it's a chance for you to also go over some stuff that you did in Grade 9 and 8, . . . and then also do some Grade 10 stuff.

Cyrus's response was succinct, similar to that of Master K. He considered the course valuable because "it's a course that would be better for people that are bad at English in junior high and have trouble reading and spelling, and they just help you work on it."

During the exit interviews all of the students acknowledged that they had made personal gains over the course of the semester. Steve no longer has an aversion to reading out loud and apparently is more comfortable in reading now, which is a marked improvement from his earlier attitude. Constantine appears to have acquired new reading skills, and Hayley certainly sees improvement in her ability to respond to short-answer questions, although her ongoing difficulty with longer written work continues. Both Master K. and Cyrus, although they did not specifically cite strategies for improvement, acknowledged that they have made gains that will assist them in subsequent courses. Jennai appreciated the less demanding course requirements and the flexibility with deadlines and stressed that she does not feel "stupid."

Class Dynamics: A Safe Learning Environment

In the last chapter I organized the themes into distinct categories, but several can also fit under the umbrella of safe and caring environments. Much has been written about the need to create learning environments in which students feel safe and comfortable and thus are able to learn. Connecting with students, accepting them, and encouraging them to work and apply themselves are essential to fostering safe environments. Other factors that also help to create the best possible learning environment will be explored in the following section. Blum (2005) discussed connectedness:

> Although connecting students to school is important at all grade levels, it's especially crucial during the adolescent years. In the last decade, educators and school health professionals have increasingly pointed to school connectedness as an important factor in reducing the likelihood that adolescents will engage in health-compromising behaviors (p. 16).

In this classroom gathering, Mr. T. facilitated a sense of connectedness in this learning community. From his casual greetings and discussions at the door to his more empathetic and sensitive awareness of personal issues that emerge during the emotion-laden teenage years, it is apparent that Mr. T. is aware of the impact of his relaxed, welcoming attitude on students. He treats students with respect and encourages community building by presenting opportunities for group rewards (movie Fridays) or for collaborative learning in which he encourages group success. Jennai commented on the sense of community in Mr. T.'s classroom:

> It's different because there's a smaller class and the teacher can pay more attention to you. And it's easier to learn because you feel more comfortable. Maybe I notice that some students have a problem reading aloud, and I know some people feel stupid when they make mistakes because I do too, and I notice that they feel a lot more comfortable and they kind of laugh it off, and then everything's okay.

Master K. was also aware of the impact of the smaller class:

> It was fine. It wasn't a big class all staring out at you. And the class was a bit smaller, so it takes a little less stress off of you. It's been a bit awkward [in other classes] because there's more students in other classes.

Cyrus agreed: "It's a smaller class and everyone is friends. You can talk to everyone—the teacher. It's an easier program. ["Why?"] It's more spread out, and more help from the teacher because it's a smaller class." Size is obviously a factor in building a sense of community. The original team of teachers who designed the Plus program stressed the importance of capping the class size at 25 to make students feel that they can take risks and make mistakes in a smaller setting; furthermore, the teachers can monitor the progress of the students more easily in a smaller class.

Madame M. has taught ELA 10-2 Plus, and at the time of this interview she was teaching the follow-up ELA 20-2 Plus. She recalled several students who had benefited from the unique small-class setting:

> I have one boy in my class who suffers from a mental illness, and he doesn't come to class on a regular basis. However, he comes to school and meets with the counselor. I met him on Friday; I hadn't seen him for two weeks, and his counselor told me he was coming. So I have his file, and everything he needs, as we're doing it on a daily basis, I keep in his file. And then after school on Friday he came up to me, and I gave him all of the work. He has a problem being in crowds, and he's on medication. Attending school is an issue for him at the moment. So he took all the work that we had done in his absence. He's a really, really excellent student. He has difficulty with his attendance, but he has no problem doing the work at home, and so he will come back to me with all he has done in the past, with all of this work, and he will pass this course. . . . That wouldn't happen if he were in a regular class. First of all, in a regular class with thirty-five other students, that's just not possible. But the record keeping [in the Plus program] for him is [manageable]. Every student is given that chance, because that's the way he works. That's the best way for that student, and he can't be penalized because he's ill, number one; and number two, he's not coming to school. He's learning to the best of his—fulfilling all of the requirements, just not doing it in the room.

Madame M. related another example:

> But look at where these kids [the Plus students] are coming from. The fact that some of them are in the classroom at nine in the morning is a huge achievement, the fact that they actually turn up. I think [it's important] to be flexible, to not take the rules too seriously. There's, I think, in that classroom a huge element of respect that goes both ways. Some of the students in that class—one of my little girls, with the pseudonym Jenny, comes from way, way, way in the northeast because she's not living at her own home any more; she's living with her rock-star boyfriend way in the northeast, and she comes to class. The only class she

> comes to is this one because she feels really accepted. She goes home after the class, back to her home in the northeast; it takes her over an hour to get here. And I think she comes because it's an atmosphere that she is not rejected in.

These two examples illustrate the personal, individualized teaching that occurs in the Plus program. Mr. T. and Madame M. meet every day to discuss issues, situations, and students, because many of the students in Madame M.'s ELA 20-2 Plus have taken previous ELA 10-2 Plus courses that Mr. T. has taught. The smaller class sizes permit them to monitor progress and get to know the students individually, which benefits those students. They have a mutual set of expectations for behavior that include, according to Madame M.,

> respect. There are not putdowns, and students like that. They know all the putdowns because they've been on the receiving end of them, so it's very easy for them to put other students down. It's almost for some of them an automatic reflex. That doesn't happen; it really doesn't happen in that room.

I can attest to the atmosphere of respect in the Plus classroom when I was observing. Hayley would make what I felt were inappropriate comments for a high school student, yet I never saw a negative reaction. Other students simply failed to respond, or in some cases they asked for further clarification in a matter-of-fact manner. Constantine, in particular, was very supportive and listened to Hayley's ramblings about *American Idol* contestants or other discussions.

Egan (2005) pointed out that "each of us has a unique brain, but our minds are made up of all kinds of shared things that come to us only from living and learning within a community" (p. 8). This community of students did indeed learn from each other and with each other, and all six of the participants declared at one point or another during the interviews that Mr. T. is a "good teacher." Langer (2002) found that exemplary classrooms have a climate of respect, openness, supportiveness, and participation. Effective teachers are in touch with their students, their profession, their colleagues, and society at large. Good teachers, as Jennai suggested, help, and Mr. T. "wanted to test our responsibility, so obviously our teacher let us work on our own. And if we needed help, then he'd give us help." Constantine agreed: "He helps you. He explains it better to you, and it's just different—easier—but still the same curriculum. He describes it better and puts more time into us."

Accountability

There can be no denying that this ELA 10-2 Plus classroom was a safe and inviting area. Mr. T. provided the structure so that students were able to take risks, ask questions, and learn. The questions remain, How *much* did they actually learn during this semester, and were the learnings appropriate for Grade 10 students? This is perhaps the major challenge of the Plus program. Pirie (2002) reported:

> Lower-level literacy may have served well enough for the old industrial economy, but as the new economy pushes unskilled and semi-skilled jobs out to workers in the developing world, future employment in major western nations will increasingly demand more sophisticated thinking and communication skills. What counts as adequate literacy has historically been defined by the changing needs of society and its economy. (p. 6)

The Alberta Learning (2000) Program of Studies defines a set of outcomes that are considered adequate for a graduating high school student. The two basic aims of senior high school English language arts are as follows:

> One, . . . to encourage, in students, an understanding and appreciation of the significance and artistry of literature. The second aim is to enable each student to understand and appreciate language and to use it confidently and competently for a variety of purposes, with a variety of audiences and in a variety of situations for communication, personal satisfaction and learning. (p. 1)

In addition, Alberta Education stipulated that "senior high schools students must be prepared to meet evolving literacy demands in Canada and the international community" (p. 1). With regard to whether the Plus program meets the Program of Studies (Alberta Learning, 2000) outcomes, Mr. T. stated:

> I would like to say yes, but, realistically, no. ["No?"] No. No. Just the pace those kids work simply does not enable them to complete all the work necessary. I mean, I think I cover all the concepts and skills that they need at some point in the course, but the amount of work that they do compared to a regular class is just nothing, not even in the same universe.

Having observed the class and viewed the caliber of a selection of assignments that the students submitted and the long-range plans, I agree with Mr. T. that many of the prescribed ELA 10-2 Program of Studies (Alberta Learning, 2000) outcomes were not been fully achieved. Many of these students were not reading grade-appropriate materials, and accommodations and modifications were made so that they could be successful. The rigor of other ELA 10-2 course outlines that I examined was not evident here. The Alberta Program of Studies (Alberta Learning, 2000) mandates that students have opportunities to listen and speak, read and write, and view and represent. There is evidence that the planning took into consideration all six of the strands, but the level of the oral discussions and the complexity of the written work did not meet Grade 10 standards. Several of the visual projects that they submitted appeared to be rather immature and lacked depth, and the modification in this program that allows partial assignments to be used as a basis of assessment is often not viable in regular programs.

Mr. T. is very aware of the capabilities of these students and of the gaps in learning that many of these students have suffered. To compensate, Mr. T. uses extensive vocabulary-building exercises and discussions to expand the students' prior knowledge that may not be offered in other English classrooms where students have the necessary background.

The Program of Studies (Alberta Learning, 2000) encourages "an appreciation of the significance and artistry of literature" (p. 1), and the level of appreciation that students can acquire from, for example, limited texts such as the hockey novel that Steve used for his novel study, the title of which he could not remember, is questionable. Master K. admitted that he had not finished reading his novel, which makes his level of appreciation also difficult to gauge. Hayley is the only student who is capable of independently reading more complex materials; however, the level of analysis in her written assignment did not match her reading ability.

A question may arise about the validity of "watering down" or modifying programs so much that essential learnings are lost; however, many of these students would have left school or failed repeatedly, and therefore what learning would have taken place? It is a fine balance between maintaining the integrity of the program (i.e., adherence to the Program of Studies) and providing safe, manageable learning environments for at-risk students.

Film study is included as a minimum requirement for text study in high school English courses, and a unit on film study is part of the Plus program. In examining the unit requirements and then comparing those identified in the *Guide to Implementation* that accompanies the Program of Studies (Alberta Learning, 2000), I found that the differences are obvious. Although the unit included exploration of literary, cinematic, and dramatic elements, the required complexity and level of analysis in the Plus unit were considerably lower. Lower-level comprehension questions such as "What is a quest?" and

"Do quest stories usually have a hero? If so, what qualities does the hero normally possess?" made up the majority of the assignment. There were no opportunities to "express preferences and expand interests or consider new perspectives" (p. 58), which is included as outcome subheadings in the *Guide to Implementation*.

Similarly, when I briefly examined the final unit in the Plus program, which included a research component and oral presentation, I noted that the rigor was not apparent there either. Steve, for example, researched Wayne Gretzky and then created a posterboard filled with copies of photos and headlines from newspapers that celebrated Gretzky's accomplishments. Constantine was interested in Shakespeare and did some calligraphy on a posterboard that included several of Shakespeare's famous quotations. Jennai expressed an interest in Bob Marley, and her poster was filled with Xerox copies of old photos and marijuana symbols. I observed several of the oral presentations that accompanied the research and found them to be simplistic and very basic.

I did not see any other final products for units of work; however, when I walked around the classroom on a number of occasions, I saw samples of writing that was composed of simple sentences with poor punctuation and spelling. The Reading Inventories also revealed that many of these students lacked basic writing skills.

Commentary

The discussion of dimensions and stages of reading in chapter 2 delineated important research that describes what happens when readers read. Appleyard (1990) discussed the five different roles that readers assume, and Protherough's (1983) model includes stages through which readers travel in reading. More recent is Wilhelm's (1997) dimensions concept. During my observations in the classroom I did not see any clear indication that these students engaged in any of these stages. Certainly they brought in their own past experiences, which Rosenblatt (1978) saw as essential; however, except for Hayley, who often, I feel, escaped into a paperback simply to shut out the classroom, there was no clear evidence of aesthetic or even engaged reading. Granted, I was in the classroom for only limited time periods and did not witness any out-of-school experiences, but after reviewing the students' interview transcripts, I did not have a sense that these students actually read traditional forms of text.

This observation, of course, does not take into account the other reading that these students do, which includes extensive multimedia usage. A possible follow-up research project aimed at examining these alternate forms of making meaning by using any or perhaps all of researchers' notable reading stages and stances would prove interesting. I am certain that the results would be very different.

A closer look at Zirinsky and Rau's (2001) list of attributes is needed to round out this discussion. It was apparent that any reading that occurred in this classroom was social and served a variety of functions, mainly to gain information. These students have a history of reading difficulties, and being a part of the program has not changed that. Relaxing deadlines and giving choice, providing smaller class settings, and assisting struggling readers may just mask the underlying issue. Students are not engaged because they have difficulty "finding the 'right' book" (p. 23), and "school reading during junior and senior high school years is sadly rarely meaningful" (p. 23).

Maybe it is enough for Master K. to be proficient in locating necessary information on the Web or being able to text-message his friends. Maybe it is enough that Cyrus and Constantine use other sources to get information. Not everyone is a reader, and perhaps because we enjoy reading so much, we who are proud members of "the club" feel the need to evangelize and spread the "truth" to all. Perhaps it is enough that these students are aware that reading is important, that reading skills are needed to fill out job applications and mortgage documents, and that using the newspaper can help find cheaper groceries or a job. Perhaps we should not be clouding our vision of what is essential with our values and our prejudices. I am sure that Master K.'s pleasure at finding the right part so that he can fix his Honda is as real as my pleasure from reading Rohinton Mistry's newest novel.

We teachers seem to have an almost innate need to push, drag, and coerce students to fit our beliefs of what reading is. English teachers are especially demanding: The writing that is evaluated is never quite good enough, and there is always room for improvement. I spent several years as a member of the standard-setting committee for the written component of the Grade 9 Language Arts Provincial Achievement Test, and I was amazed that so many of my colleagues were so zealous in their reluctance to award "perfect" scores to a piece of student writing. Our practices of always correcting, revising, and circling with red pens is frustrating and can result in student apathy.

Zirinsky and Rau's (2001) and Pennac's (1994) depressing beliefs about school reading are further exacerbated by the incredible push to test/teach/test/reteach/test; that focus swallows up many opportunities for students to become engaged and develop the skills to appreciate reading.

Further Commentary: Conflicts

Several issues arise with regard to the Plus program. In the initial planning document that the team of teachers drew up, they stipulated that marks of zero are not to be given to ensure that students remain encouraged and do not fall back into their past familiar routine of failing and giving up. This was not the case though: Both Hayley and Jennai received a mark of zero over the term. Hayley, in particular, received a zero on her poetry unit, on the film study unit, and on the final written part of the final exam. Jennai also received a zero on her poetry unit. For missing the final two-part exam, she was assigned *N/M* ("no mark"). This inconsistency between program outline and actual practice is noteworthy; however, these zeroes indicate that the students obviously did not hand in one piece of the assignment, and it would not be ethical to assign a grade when they had completed absolutely no work. That would make teaching and evaluating a sham and would not be fair to other students who apply themselves. Although Jennai and Hayley, in particular, were given numerous opportunities, the responsibility is the student's. Therefore, the statement that no zeroes were given should be revised because this was not the practice.

Another inconsistency arose in regard to the storage of materials. One practice was to keep all student work in the classroom to avoid lost assignments. However, misplacing assignments or work in progress occurred occasionally. Several times I observed worksheets and samples of writing and other assignments leaving the room at the end of class. Also during one of my visits, when Mr. T. asked a student where yesterday's worksheet was, he replied, "I lost it," which reveals that his work had not been stored in the classroom following the previous lesson.

Madame M. had a bookshelf at the back of her classroom where she stored a number of binders that held all of her Plus students' work, and she stated that she checked each binder regularly (usually every night prior to going home). Mr. T. did not have such a system; instead, his students either left their work or they did not. I did not see a file folder or binder for each student on top of his bookshelf, although he kept accurate records on missed assignments and quiz results.

Madame M. identified naming the program *Plus* because she was concerned that students would feel that they were being singled out or labeled because they were struggling. However, I feel that all of the students in the class were very aware of its special nature, and several of them—Jennai and Hayley in particular—did not feel that they needed the extra assistance that they were receiving. Hayley was sure that if she just applied herself, she would succeed; and Jennai felt that she had the ability but lacked the motivation to do regular class work. Jennai recognized the difference between the classes:

> Teachers in general, if you're teaching a lower-level class, if you try to still get everything in the curriculum, if you try to get all of that in there and then also test us with other higher-level stuff, it gives us a bit of a challenge, and some people like that, because in some of the other classes I can do the stuff, but I feel so stupid because they're giving me work from Grade 4. My little sister is like, "Your homework is so easy." I was so embarrassed. In my math class I was like, "I know," and she was like, "Oh, okay."

Teenagers are very astute at figuring out educational labels and differences, and Jennai and her classmates are no different.

The last issue is the rigor of the program, and the debate continues on whether or not it meets the academic needs of students. After having spent time in the classroom, I feel that even though the level of work does not meet the standard that many Grade 10 students are producing, this program meets these students' needs, and they are making gains. They are coming to school, some more frequently than they did before, and they all have reported improvement. For many of them—Steve and Master K. in particular—they are finally able to relate to an English teacher and to the subject of English. It is imperative that we ask, Are we teachers of curriculum, or are we teachers of students? Perhaps Elliot Eisner (2006) summed up this discussion best:

> At a time when schools are buffeted by performance standards and high-stakes testing, we must remember that the student is a whole person who has an emotional and social life, not just an intellectual one. And this is as true for graduate students in the grandest citadels of higher education as it is for students in elementary school. We teachers need to be more nurturing. The more we stress only what we can measure in school, the more we need to remember that not everything that is measurable matters, and not everything that matters is measurable. We need to pay attention to the whole child and address the whole child in our teaching practices. How we teach is related achieving the deep satisfactions of teaching. (p. 46)

Answering the Questions and Making Some Recommendations

Initially, the base of this research rested on two guiding questions. The first question required an exploration and observation of reading patterns to reveal new insights into adolescent reading habits. After having scoured the professional literature and listened to the students' views, I will make a few observations. First, I agree with Aronson (2001) and Zirinsky and Rau (2001) that adolescents—and in particular this group of adolescents—do, in fact, read. Perhaps they were not reading titles that were included in the English syllabus that was presented at the beginning of the term; however, all six of these students attested to reading "something." Their reading choices were guided by their personal need to gain information, which is Rosenblatt's (1982) efferent stance, or to read for pleasure, or both. Master K. had a real interest in automotives, and he read for that purpose. Cyrus, on the other hand, enjoyed history, and he read to find out facts and trivia about geographic locations that interest him. Steve enjoyed hockey, and his reading focused mainly on that sport. So it was for the other participants: They all searched for material that interested them, that was of value to them.

Interest was a primary motivator, but the students also used a variety of media that was certainly not restricted to paper that incorporates written text. All six of the participants cited multiliteracy preferences, with computer access paramount. Using *search engine*, *MSN*, *text messaging*, and *downloading* as key vocabulary terms, this group was far more proficient with what Harste (2003), Hull and Schultz (2002), and Alvermann (2002) referred to as the *new literacies* than I had originally anticipated.

One other discovery pertaining to the reading journeys of these students was their lack of memories or impressions of their early reading experiences. They simply did not remember the specific titles of books that they read in their early years. Many of these students may have had early experiences that did not include reading or being read to, and books were therefore not part of their lives as they are for many people. Because it is impossible to speculate on a cause, I leave this discussion as it is—open.

Implications for Teachers

In answer to the second question that drove this project, many implications arose with regard to effective ways to motivate students to engage in productive, sound pedagogical approaches. Choice is a constant! Mr. T. emphasized:

> Choice of literature is a huge, huge component of it [the Plus program]—the fact that, instead of doing one novel study with thirty-five kids, they get to pick of a list of thirty novels. They get to pick what they want to read. It makes a complete difference. The fact that they get to choose the short stories, choose the kind of assignments that they want to do, that makes all the difference with them because they've been told for three or four years exactly what to do.

Feinstein (2004) discussed the teenage brain and explained the stages through which these young people pass as they travel from childhood to adulthood. This reminds us that, to learn self-discipline and self-control, teenagers must be given opportunities to make selections, take risks, try, and perhaps fail, but it is in taking chances that they establish boundaries and build confidence. These students appreciated being able to choose their reading materials, to choose ways to express what they learned, and even to choose their working partners and seats.

Besides choice, students must also be given time to read during class. This teaches them to see reading as important and valuable. Time is a great indicator of what is considered important in schools, and Krashen's (1993) FVR should not be restricted to elementary classrooms only; teenagers also deserve the right to read recreationally in a school setting. Zirinsky and Rau's (2001) reminder that, for teenagers, "finding the 'right' book can be difficult" (p. 23) makes it critical that time also be provided to explore the shelves in our school libraries or access a librarian.

Flexibility works closely with choice, and students also appreciate flexible due dates and projects. They appreciate being able to submit partially completed work and being offered a variety of projects that include charts, calendars, and PowerPoint presentations. Teachers do not always meet every deadline set for them; is it therefore possible to give their students some leeway? Rigid, defined adherence to due dates and completion is not always supportive for students and can lead to failure to complete any work (as Hayley succinctly stated).

In an extensive five-year study of literacy classrooms that was discussed earlier, Langer (2002) identified several characteristics that she deemed important in building literacy programs. Students must be treated as capable learners and given rigorous curriculum, sparked with a "can-do" attitude, and treated as individuals. Students must also be encouraged to slowly, carefully build social context, and they earn their academic clothing by completing appropriate tasks.

The students enrolled in the Plus program learned curriculum that demonstrated, for the most part, appropriate rigor for their learning capabilities, and they were certainly encouraged and motivated to improve and succeed. Both Mr. T. and Madame M. had devised individualized programs with the students' strengths and areas for improvement at their core. Mr. T., in particular, established a rapport with his students, and this has very important implications for teachers. Stronge (2002) devoted an entire chapter in his text to the "teacher as person" (pp. 13-25):

> Effective, caring teachers know students both formally and informally. They use every opportunity at school and in the community to keep the lines of communication open. . . . Teachers and students spend much of their day interacting academically. However, social interactions and those that give the teacher opportunities to demonstrate caring, fairness, and respect have been shown to be an important element of teacher effectiveness. A teacher's ability to relate to students and to make positive, caring connections with them plays a significant role in cultivating a positive learning environment and promoting student achievement (pp. 15-17).

Mr. T. prompted both Jennai and Hayley to take responsibility for their own progress and complete necessary assignments. I did not see examples of nagging or harping at students; instead, Mr. T. spoke in a calm and sincere manner. During my observations I recorded some of his responses to situations that put the onus for learning back on the students; for example, "You'll have to deal with that," which referred to Constantine's uncompleted religion assignment; or "What are you going to do about that?" with regard to K.'s difficulty at another high school.

The Plus program limits the number of students in a classroom, which is a definite advantage to them and certainly allows for individual differences and programming. The implications here are obvious. However, class size is often a factor that is outside the control of the individual teacher. Class sizes that stretch to the mid 30s are common, and teachers need strategies and techniques to avoid burnout and frustration. It is one thing to agree with Stronge's (2002) emphasis on the need for social interactions with students and getting to know students; however, the reality of working with over 100 students per day can be simply overwhelming. Mr. T. has remarkable communication skills and a true interest in the lives of his students. They respond similarly to him, which was obvious when so many students dropped in to see him during class breaks and after school.

Another implication follows from the students' discussion of hands-on activities. Master K. and Steve enjoy working with their hands, and Jennai enjoys the drama opportunities during language arts. Her comment that "English isn't something that's really hard to make exciting" suggests that offering activities that allow students to become engaged is important. Math is Cyrus's, Hayley's, Jennai's, and Steve's favorite subject, and all attested to enjoying manipulation on the computer, especially playing games, chatting, and surfing Web sites.

Alternate forms of pedagogy were not apparent in this class setting. This group of proficient computer users would have benefited greatly by having some different forms of media available. One shared computer that did not have internet access is not sufficient. Print based anthologies and Xeroxed work booklets provide the same reading experiences that these students have endured for years. Some online magazines, websites and opportunities to create hypertext and participate in chat rooms would certainly be appreciated by this group of learners.

Further Possible Research Topics

This study was bounded by a one-semester unit. Further exploration could possibly include a longitudinal study to monitor the progress of the participants for a longer period. Perhaps tracking students from their enrolment in the ELA 10-2 Plus program in Grade 10 over their entire high school experience would reveal some interesting data. I believe that Grade 12 English results would also be informative. Students might be able to compare and contrast their experiences in English courses. So many of this study's findings were based on the interactions between Mr. T. and his students, and I think it would also be valuable to compare other teachers and their teaching styles. There is much to be learned from watching others teach because every teacher brings unique and personal characteristics to his or her practice.

Another possibility for future investigation is a comparison between the regular ELA 10-2 program and the ELA 10-2 Plus course. My study involved only the students and curriculum from the Plus program, and I can therefore speculate only on the differences between these two programs. Hayley, Jennai, and Constantine suggested similarities in the two programs, but they made no definite comparisons with the other course. Both courses should be based on the same Program of Studies, but it would be interesting to compare and contrast the pacing of lessons and the methods and results of evaluation.

The impact of technology on these students is remarkable, and the realm of multimedia usage could be the foundation for a fascinating study. Tracking student access to any form of technology would be an interesting, relevant, and timely topic.

Hagood, Stevens and Reinking (2002) reminded us that "for adolescents literacy is multimodal, and rather than rescue information from static texts, they actively create meaning dynamically across diverse media" (p. 75). Hagood, Stevens, and Reinking (2002) continued, "Adults tend to address computer-mediated literacies as general signs of the times, supplemental bodies of knowledge, whereas the adolescents seem to live in the moment engaged in the literacies they enjoy" (p. 76).

This group of students attested to spending a fair amount of their out-of-school lives interacting in a number of ways with a variety of multimedia. They used text messaging, MSN, and chat rooms and played a number of interactive games besides searching websites and downloading music. Teachers of language arts should be aware of this trend and provide opportunities to link out-of-school reading with in-school reading. Alvermann (2002) agreed and issued the following caution: "Our youth, who are increasingly inattentive and disinterested in school, are increasingly developing an unsanctioned articulate and even masterful digitally literate, critically literate, and intermedial competence that schools are slow to recognize or adapt to" (p. 50).

Yet another possible topic for future research could be gender; in particular, reading acquisition for boys compared to girls. This is a much-researched topic, and the work is already well underway. Brozo (2006), King and Gurian (2006), Gurian, Henley, and Trueman (2001), and Gurian and Stevens (2005) have begun some exciting work in this area, and I think further expansion would be extremely valuable.

Conclusion: Back to the Beginning

The focus of this research was the reading experiences of a group "at-risk" Grade 10 students. Their early learning-to-read experiences, although somewhat brief, provided some insight. The differences between their in-school and out-of-school reading experiences point to some important implications for teachers. What is apparent, however, is the importance of the relationship between students and teacher. This research was aimed at examining reading experiences, but the students did not provide as rich a discussion on their reading habits as I had hoped. Instead, they spoke of the personality traits and teaching strategies that Mr. T. used.

This was an English classroom; however, I did not see any examples of innovative or "cutting-edge" pedagogy. Primarily, print-dominated text was used, although the students did refer to alternate reading experiences at home. Building a learning environment in which students feel valued and will take risks is important, but again, this was an English classroom.

Allington (2007) discussed effective comprehension teachers:

> These effective teachers typically created multiple-text and/or multiple-level curriculum plans that offered all students the opportunity to engage in classroom reading, writing, and conversational episodes. There were two huge advantages in using a multitext or multilevel curriculum. First, far more students were routinely engaged in academic work in these classrooms than was the case in more typical classrooms, largely because having a variety of texts available meant that virtually all students could find texts that they were able to read accurately, fluently, and with comprehension. The second advantage was that when students were provided opportunities to select which text(s) they would read for a given topic or unit, their level of engagement in academic work was high and sustained. Giving students such choices is a powerful factor in motivating engagement and fostering achievement. (p. __)

Providing a variety of rich, interesting material that is at an appropriate level to allow the student to be successful is imperative, as is providing alternate formats.

This research also revealed the incredible amount of professional writing that is available. As a reader, I have been moved by Pennac's (1994) list of reading rights and his statement that

> a book is a refuge on those days when rain pelts the windowpane; there is the quiet enchantment of the pages as the subway car rocks us, the novel hidden in the drawer of the secretary's desk, the teacher's stolen moments while the students work away, and the student in the back row sneaking a read as she waits to turn in a blank sheet of paper. (p. 96)

As an educator and a researcher, I have also been influenced by van Manen (2002):

> We must always remain reflective about the deeper meanings and consequences of the experiences of children who are touched by us. This also means that we should not be afraid to make mistakes, since our examples may be well-intended but sometimes poorly realized. We might even say that is it impossible not to make mistakes and sometimes to do things that one later regrets and wished that one had done otherwise. The important difference lies in the constant striving that is animated by the pedagogical intent. (p. 281)

Mistakes and missed opportunities abound, but human frailty overlooked, we are still engaged in the sacred covenant of teaching. I conclude with Pirie's (2002) statement: "It's easy for anyone, sitting quietly away from the whirl of the classroom, to reflect on what might have been, but thrown into the pressure of school life, any of us might have done the same as the teachers" (p. 22).

For this group of students, in this school, in this classroom, at this time, the learning experiences were valuable. The vibrant colors of the students' reading experiences and the rich patterns in the classroom blended together in a unique creation. My research has illuminated some of these patterns and offered possibilities for ways teachers might enrich the reading lives of at-risk grade ten students.

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APPENDIX A:

PROPOSAL FOR THE ELA 10-2 PLUS PROGRAM

Appendix A: Proposal for the ELA 10-2 Plus Program

ENGLISH PROJECT

Alberta Initiative for School Improvement

1. Briefly describe the project.

   This is a proposal to address the academic needs of students in English 13 and English 23. We would like to offer the most 'at risk' students in these streams a program that is different in pedagogy and anticipated results and be able to offer it in a more accommodating and supportive environment.

   See attached (background/recommendations/rational)

2. School(s) participating:

   [redacted]

3. Target group:

   - *Approximately 75 students per semester who have a history of failure in English Language Arts beginning in junior high and continuing through high school. Over a 3-year period this project could have a positive impact on as many as 450 students.*
   - *Staff: 3 to 6 members of the English Department will require Professional Development opportunities to review literature, modify curriculum and meet as mentors/collaborators during the project*

4. How will this project improve student learning?

   - *The goal of this project is to increase Academic success by offering more individualized, one on one instruction, to students who have not demonstrated success in the past. The development of more individualized learning packages would allow these students to take greater control of their own learning. By reconfiguring the classroom environment, by having students using individual study carrels and small seminar tables, and by having ready access to a computer, these students will have far greater focus and less distraction.*
   - *Greater success in English may result in overall attendance at school, which should have a positive affect on overall academic success.*

5. Name specific strategies that will be used in the project.

   - *Selecting the most appropriate students in concert with the Teacher Advisor, the parents and Student Services, students will be identified on the basis of previous failures in English and an expressed desire to change this practice. Students will apply to get into this program and sign a performance contract co-signed by their parents.*

- *Existing curriculum will be written in the form of learning packages that students will work on independently but with constant teacher monitoring.*
- *Teachers will approach the project with the goal of integrating these students into a more traditional setting as soon as they demonstrate the ability to maintain their level of independence*
- *By setting up the classroom with individual study carrels and tables for small group seminars, students will experience fewer distractions and thus, be more focused on the tasks at hand. Ready access to computers for completing assignments will provide further incentive.*
- *The teachers involved in this project will work with students on an independent small group basis, teaching such skills as time management and setting goals in addition to the more traditional skills associated with reading and writing.*
- *A book rental fee will ensure these students will always have access to necessary materials.*

6. How will success be measured?

- *Students involved in this project are expected to have overall averages in English equal to or better than the average earned by the students not in the project (note: students involved in this project have a history of failure and dropping courses).*
- *Absenteeism rates for students in this project will be lower than for students not in the project.*
- *Students who are reintegrated into a more traditional setting will continue to be more successful in their learning.*
- *Incidents of negative behaviour will be reduced overall. Many of these students identified for this project already have a documented history of behavioural problems.*

7. What resources are required:

- *Time to develop learning packages. Our goal for the first year is to develop and test materials at the 13 level. In the second year we will develop materials at the 23 level and modify previously developed materials where necessary.*
- *Time to assess the success and the needs of the project. Teachers need the opportunity to collaborate, plan and teach together before an assessment can be done.*
- *Hardware and software for two computer stations.*

8. What professional development is required?

Teachers may need the opportunity to review relevant literature on a project of this nature. They should also have the opportunity to collaborate with teachers who may be involved with similar programs in other schools.

9. Approximate budget:

Year One		
20 substitute days for curriculum development	$ 2,660.00	
10 substitute days for collaboration	1,330.00	
2 computers and software	6,000.00	
TOTAL		$ 9,990.00
Year Two		
10 substitute days for curriculum development	$ 1,330.00	
10 substitute days for collaboration	1,330.00	
TOTAL		$ 2,660.00
Year Three		
10 substitute days for collaboration	$ 1,330.00	
TOTAL		$ 1,330.00
GRAND TOTAL		**$13,980.00**

10. Length of the project?

3 years

11. Priority:

As this is our only literacy project it is Priority No. 1

[redacted] AISI Project

The idea for this project began in the fall of 1999 when three English 13 teachers met and discovered that in each of their classes over half of the students had failed either grade nine Language Arts or English 13 in the previous year. The students shared a number of characteristics which contributed to negative behaviours in the classroom. The students were often discipline problems, they did not purchase the necessary textbooks, they had irregular attendance patterns and some also had attention deficit disorder and did not work well in large group situations. In all cases, these factors contributed to negative attitudes about the classroom in particular and school in general. Many had been passed from year to year, despite failing grades, and they had never developed successful work habits. The pattern of failure and poor behaviour seemed bound to be repeated.

The project we envisioned was to create an independent learning model for these students. We planned to identify the target group by the end of the school year and place these students into a special class. We planned to select students on the basis of their failing grades in English 13 and English 23, from recommendations from the grade nine Language Arts teachers, and from the incoming students' CUM files. Interested teachers of both English 13 and English 23 met and discussed how we could collaborate and create an independent learning model. We shared our plans with [redacted] Language Arts Supervisor, who contributed a class set of new textbooks and a Teachers' Guide for English 13 so that we could solve the problem of students arriving without the necessary materials. We agreed to assign our teacher aide, [redacted], to this classroom on a full time basis for this class.

To address the problem created by irregular attendance, we agreed that no students would receive failing or "zero" grades for assignments. If a student missed any classes, he or she could begin at the point the student had left off, rather than receive a grade of zero, for example – experience has showed us that few students made up missed assignments. Files would be maintained for each student to keep a careful record of all assignments completed. An assignment that was deemed less than 50% would be returned to the student for more work and/or revision. We believed that the fact that the students had some choice in their assignments, that they did not have to pull along through the course as a group, but rather in a way that recognized and respected the individual nature of each student, and that working independently could cut down on the interruptions and disruptive behaviours of students who did not work well in large group situations would all contribute to more successful outcomes. Our plan was to offer this course in both English 13 and English 23 for the next school year.

We also recognized that computers in the classroom would be a great asset. We had frequently observed that students might struggle in a handwritten piece of writing and demonstrate great reluctance to revise and rewrite, for example, but would willingly work at the computer to plan, revise, edit, rewrite, polish their writing, and produce a document that both looked professional and was indeed worthy of respect. Having computers available in the classroom would definitely facilitate the writing process.

Around the time that we were finalizing our plans we realized that the AISI Project could help us. We knew we needed considerable teacher collaboration time that was beyond our department budgets. We wanted computers in the classroom and we also knew that we did not have the funds for them. We needed funding for textbooks for the English 23 students in this project. We had heard of reading programmes used in other schools for the novel study and wanted to pursue acquiring them for our project. All of this cost money that we did not have. So we applied for and received AISI funding. The title "Literacy Project" was applied to our plans, but it must be understood that our primary goal in this project has always been to help students with a history of failure in English and Language Arts achieve success, leading to an increased self-confidence and success in other aspects of school life. Literacy may improve as a result, but it has not been our main target.

The project began in the fall of 2000. Although we had wanted to include both English 13 and English 23, the schedule gave us only one English 13 class for each semester. [redacted] teaches the class this semester and [redacted] will continue with it next semester. We do plan to carry it to the English 23 level next year. In September four English 13 teachers met and planned units together. [redacted] is organizing more such collaboration days. It is important that as many teachers as are interested be involved with this.

Our impression so far is that the project is indeed successful. The students are experiencing success, our target goal. Their self-confidence has increased in such an environment, another target goal. I have been in the classroom numerous times and have always been impressed by the attentiveness of the students to their tasks. They were all working. Some were working at their desks, some were sharing their ideas and assignments with the teacher, discussing what to do next, how they did on a particular assignment, and so on. The rapport between the teacher and students is very positive. Some students have already expressed the desire to continue with this class at the next grade level. [redacted] cautions that there will always be the problem with a few students who simply refuse to make any effort under any circumstances, but that these students are definitely in the minority.

Our goal was to help this target group achieve success and so far we are very pleased with the progress of this project. As part of the AISI approval requirements, we will monitor the success of these students over a period of three years to see how the success carries itself to English 33, particularly in comparison to students from previous years who did not have such a project available to them.

[redacted]

APPENDIX C:

PERSONAL READING HISTORY INVENTORY

Appendix C: Personal Reading History Inventory

Personal Data:

- Age: __________
- Gender: __________
- Grade in school: __________
- Repeating English course? Yes __________ No __________
- Final mark obtained in last English course completed: __________

School Experiences:

1. When did you learn to read?__________
2. What were some of your favorite books in childhood? __________
3. What memories do you have of childhood reading? ?__________
4. What kind of reader were you in elementary school?__________
5. What kind of a reader were you in junior high school? __________
6. What are your favorite things to read? __________
7. Do you remember learning to read being easy or hard?__________
8. Did you receive any extra help at school? __________
9. Did you have lots of homework in elementary school? __________
10. What kind of homework was it? Reading? Math? Social Studies?

11. Tell about a time when you felt successful in Language Arts class: ______________________________

12. Tell about a time when you felt unsuccessful in Language Arts class: ______________________________

13. Was there any time when you felt embarrassed in Language Arts class? ______________________________

14. Tell about it: ______________________________

15. 14) Have you ever read a series of books? ________ Title (s): ______________________________

16. Who recommends the books that you read? ______________________________

17. Where do you get your books from? ______________________________

18. Has your reading changed over the years? ________

19. If yes, how? ______________________________

20. What do you like to read now that you're in high school? ______________________________

21. Do you use the computer to find information? ______________________________

22. Approximately how much time do you spend reading novels/books/magazines? ______________________________

23. What kinds of activities do you like to do in school? At home? In your free time? ______________________________

24. Do you play games where you have to read, like Monopoly? Computer games? ______________________________

25. Do you like listening to your teacher read aloud? ______________________________

26. What do you do when you can't read a word? ______________________________

Home Experiences:

1. Do you read at home (NOT homework related)? ______________________________

2. Where do you do most of your reading? ______________________________

3. Do your parents read at home? ______________________________

4. Do the men in your family read? Do the women in your family read? What do they read? Newspaper? Magazines? Which ones? Books? ______________________________
   ____
   ____

5. If they do read, what do they read? ______________________________
   ____

6. How do you spend your leisure time? ______________________________
   ____

7. Do your friends read? ______________________________

Any other comments: ____
____
____
____
____

APPENDIX D:

STUDENTS' INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Appendix D-1 : Interview Questions

(During the Course)

School Experiences:

1. Tell me about when you were learning to read:
2. Tell me about any favorite books, or favorite reading experiences:
3. Tell me about what it felt like during reading /language arts experience:
4. Tell me about a reading/language arts experience that you really enjoyed:
5. Tell me about a reading/language arts experience that you didn't enjoy:
6. At school, what do you like to do best?
7. At school, what do you least like to do?
8. At school, what are you good at?
9. At school, what are you not as good at?

Home/Out-of-School Experiences:

1. Tell me about what you do when you are not in school:
2. Do you read for fun? What do you read? If so, where do you get the materials you read? Who recommends them? Where do you read? :
3. How much time do you spend watching TV? playing games on the computer? Hanging out with friends? Talking on the phone?
4. Does anyone in your family read? Who…For how much time? Where do they get their books/magazines, etc?

Appendix D-2: Interview Questions

(Post-Course)

1. Tell me about the English 10-2 Plus course that you finished:
2. Tell me about a language arts experience you enjoyed last year:
3. Tell me about a language arts experience you didn't enjoy last year:
4. Did you feel that your reading improved:
5. How did you feel when the class was finished:
6. Did you read over the summer? What did you read? Who recommended the material?
7. What else did you do over the summer? How much time did you spend watching TV? Playing games on the computer? Hanging out with friends? Talking on the telephone?
8. Would you recommend taking the English 10-2 Plus course? Why?(Why not?)
9. How was this course different from your other language arts experiences?

APPENDIX E:

TEACHERS' INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Appendix E: Teachers' Interview Questions

Name: Years teaching: Years teaching in this school:

Major in University: Minor:

1. Courses teaching this semester:
2. Courses taught in the last three years:
3. Years teaching Plus program:
4. How did this program begin?
5. Were you involved from the beginning?
6. What are the aims of this program?
7. Describe the average student in the Plus program:
8. What criteria is used to place students in this program?
9. What are the contributing factors that create this unique setting?
10. Do you feel that this program is a success? Why? Why not? How do you measure success?
11. What kind of follow up takes place after students leave the Plus program?
12. How do students do in subsequent English courses?
13. Do you meet with Plus students' parents? If yes, what are their feelings about the program?
14. Are you meeting the Program of Studies outcomes? How?
15. How is this different from the ELA 10-2 programs?
16. How much time do you spend planning for this program? Is it more or less than other courses? How much time do you spend marking? Is it more or less than other courses?
17. What do you feel is the most important qualities needed to work with these students?
18. Have you had any additional professional development to assist you in teaching this program?
19. How do you feel that these students have experienced difficulty?

20. Has your own teaching changed since you have been involved in this program? How?

21. How much time do you spend collaborating with colleagues discussing the Plus program?

22. Do you intend to continue teaching the Plus program? If yes, why? If no, why not?

23. Do you feel that his program should be continued? If yes . . . If no . . .

24. Any further comments?